



# Life Stories from Tower Hamlets

## Tin Baths and Doodlebugs





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Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours  
St Margaret's House  
21 Old Ford Road  
London  
E2 9PL

[www.thfn.org.uk](http://www.thfn.org.uk)  
[@THFNbefriending](https://twitter.com/THFNbefriending)

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*Cover picture: East End families hopping in Kent, 1930s*

## INTRODUCTION

This collection of life stories grew out of the befriending work of Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours, a charity that has supported older people in the borough since 1947.

In 2010 we set up a project to record the memories of some of the charity's clients. Sharing their life experiences was exciting and moving for all the participants, both clients and befrienders. Some people spoke of very painful experiences for the first time and it was only the trusting relationships built up by the skilled befrienders that enabled this to happen. Memories become increasingly important as we age, but also can be fleeting and fragile. One story was told and then immediately forgotten by its teller which makes it particularly poignant. Reviewing their lives was a very positive experience for all the participants and this volume has been designed to thank them and to preserve their stories.

Every story is unique, reflecting each individual's experience through his or her own words: the devastation of the Blitz, the pain of moving to a new country, childhood experiences, schooldays, jobs of work, courting, loss of family and friends. What is not said is often as moving as what is described and there are many levels within the stories. What comes over above all is the bravery, humour and resilience of these East Enders, some of whom are no longer with us. The East End has always been a melting pot of cultures: as well as stories from Stepney, Bow and Bethnal Green we have story tellers from St Kitts, Ghana, Ireland and Bangladesh.

These are precious records of individuals, but also, they are an important part of the history of Tower Hamlets, and we are privileged to have been given them. This edition has retained as far as possible the actual words of the storytellers and has been arranged to provide variety and contrast and to highlight connections between the stories. We should like to thank all who so generously shared their life stories.

Grateful thanks are due to all the people involved in the production of this publication, all members of the THFN team who listened and recorded stories and for those who made it possible for ensuring this project took

place. Generous support from the Wakefield and Tetley Trust enabled us to originally publish this in a book format. Last but not least, our thanks go to the following for allowing us to include their photos: Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives (cover; pages 8, 18, 22, 23, 46 & 61); The Royal London Hospital Archives (page 40); Joy and Eric Foxley (page 17). We dedicate the book to all of those that took part, many of whom have now passed away.

*Rajesh Kalhan Chief Executive, THFN January 2021*

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# MINNIE

## **I come from a family of quick workers**

I was born on 31st January 1905 in a house on the corner of Seabright Street and Bethnal Green Road, where the Percy Ingle Bakery now stands. It was an old house and my main memory of it is that there were lots of red bugs in the woodwork. You could play out on the streets as there were no cars in Bethnal Green in those days. My mother used to tell us to mind we didn't get knocked down by the horse and cart while we were out playing.

Then we moved to a house off Hackney Road. There were eight of us and we needed a bigger place to live. I went to Hay Street School but can't remember much about that time apart from having scarlet fever and having to stay indoors for a long time when I was ten.

dad worked on the railways and used to bring home twenty-eight shillings and sixpence a week that had to stretch out to keep the ten of us. He used to wave a flag and blow a whistle to let the train driver know he could set off. Before that, dad used to work with my granddad John, who was German, in his boot and shoe-making shop. He left after a row with one of his brothers.

My mother didn't go out to work. She had her hands full looking after us. We all had to help around the house and she gave us jobs to do. Mine was to clean the windows and one of my brothers had to keep the cutlery polished. I remember the house being cold and the outside toilet was freezing. We used an old tin bath that used to hang on a hook on the yard wall. Friday night was the bath night, with my eldest sister helping the younger once. We all used the same water, which was black by the time we were finished.

I left school at fourteen and got a job straight away in a factory that made handbags and purses. My first wage was eight shillings a week and that seemed like a fortune to me then. I had a lot of different factory jobs including working in a tambourine factory in Gossett Street. My favourite job was working for Gaymers, the champagne bottlers. They wouldn't let

you taste the champagne but my workmates were a great bunch of girls. Even though we had to work hard, we had a laugh as well. We had what you call a good team spirit.

Although I had to give most of the money to my mother, I could keep some for myself and could go out on a Saturday night. I used to go dancing at Mother Ewins, near the Horse and Groom in Hackney. A group of us, boys and girls, also used to like going to a pub up in Chingford. One boy played an accordion; another had a mouth organ and we would have a dance and a sing-song. I used to drink brown ale or Mackeson stout. We didn't go out in the West End much at night in those days, it was too expensive. I did like to get the bus to Oxford Street to go shopping and treat myself to egg and chips at Littlewoods.

I remember the miners' strike of 1926 and the trouble on the streets. It seemed to go on for ages. There were a lot of fights between the men who were on strike and the men who were still working. I saw a lorry driver, who was delivering gas cylinders, get dragged out of his cab and beaten up for being what they called a 'scab'.

I got married in 1929 when I was 24. We didn't have a honeymoon but we had a big wedding party with lots of food, drink and dancing. All the family pulled together and put on a great party for us. My husband, who was an insurance salesman at the time, found us a house on Thistlethwaite Road in Clapton, E9. It's the only time I lived outside of Bethnal Green. It was a lovely house but I wasn't happy there, so I got him to find us a place back in Bethnal Green, near my family.

In 1939, when the Second World War started, I had a job in a factory making artificial flowers. Then after a couple of months or so, the factory was taken over by the Ministry and we started making parachutes and other things for the war effort. My job was to sew badges onto army, navy and air force caps.

The East End suffered terrible bombing, especially around the Docks. Our house was bombed in 1944, near the end of the war. We were rushing to get into the Anderson shelter in the garden. My husband pushed me in first and I ended up with cuts and bruises. He got

concussion, two dislocated fingers and needed 22 stitches from his groin to his lumbar. When I looked up I could see the roof was blown off the house and our bed was hanging out of the window. The shock led me to have a nervous breakdown and I was sent to a convalescent hospital in Huntingdon that was run by the Red Cross. I was still there at the end of the War when they put on a big party for us to celebrate VE Day.

We came back to London after the War, once the house was repaired. We didn't want to stay in that house though, and were told that we could put our names down for one of the new flats that were going up. We moved to Usk Street, Bethnal Green in 1950, I think, where I've lived ever since. They were well-made flats and I've still got the original sink and bath.



*VE Day celebrations, 1945*

My husband got an office job at the Ministry of Defence, working first at Bush House in the West End and then in Leatherhead. We had some good holidays together. We liked touring and went to Devon and Cheddar Gorge. One time we went up to Scotland and toured around Loch Lomond. Scotland was beautiful. My husband didn't have good health after the War. I think what happened to him when we were bombed out



affected his health. He died of thrombosis when he was 56. My parents lived into their 80's. My mother died aged 87; My father 84.

I kept working until I was 66. My last job was at Allison's, putting labels onto jars of food for people with diabetes. I was a quick worker - I come from a family of quick workers - and even in my 60's they would sometimes put me on assembly line where I had to mould the dough for the pies and cakes.

After retiring I used to do afternoon sessions at a community centre. I enjoyed making soft toys and dolls and having a chat and a cup of tea. They also organised trips for us to places like Southend, Shoeburyness, Folkestone and Hastings. The Council subsidised the holidays so we could afford them.

I've always liked walking and kept myself busy. I still did all of my own shopping till I was 100. I had a fall indoors and broke my hip when I was 102 and that knocked me back a lot. Paramedics had to break the door down and take me in hospital in an ambulance.

It took a long time to get over that fall. I still manage to get around on a zimmer frame when I'm indoors. In the summer I like going on outings with Friends and Neighbours to Ilford shopping centre.

I have good days and bad days now. Some days I can do more than others. When I'm feeling up for it I go to the Sundial Day Centre, which I enjoy. In the summer they also find me a volunteer who can take me out in my wheelchair to the hairdressers or the local shops.

I can't complain really.



*Minnie's birthday*

## A.M

### **I don't mind being old**

I'm 86 now, I'll be 87 on the 11th of February. I left St Kitts and went to Curaçao with my sister to work. From Curaçao we went to Holland to work. My sister got lucky, she got married to a white man in Holland, this meant that she could stay there as we only went there to work. I had to leave and come here in this country to work, nobody chose me. I can't remember how old I was when I came here, but I'm 86 now.

I worked in England and the people there was all right. In Holland if you didn't get married you couldn't stay and had to go back to where you come from. My sister used to send me money until she died; it stopped soon after because of her children. They said to me not to expect them to send money like she used to. I didn't ask for money but she used to send it to me herself. I told them that I didn't beg their mother for the money. I told them that we were sisters and we did everything together. She said to me that she had the money and wasn't going to let me suffer after growing up together and everything.

When I arrived in England, I worked in a factory. At first they didn't like black people. They, the people where I worked, ignored me. I used to take no notice of them and I got on with my work. I was hard working. They used to talk together. After a while when they saw my ways, they got accustom to me. They used to say to me 'Oh, you look nice. You dress nice coming to work', and we started talking. The factory was in Bow, we used to do all kinds of different work.

I met my husband. He used to see me talking to my boys nanny, a white nanny. You see, their father went to the States. His brother sent for him and when he went to the States he never wrote back, so he must have got involved with someone else. The children's father was a lovely man. I can't give him a bad name. So he used to see me taking them to the nanny. She wanted to adopt them but I said no because I knew if she adopted them, they wouldn't want to bother with me when they grew up. He told me that he would help me with the children and help me bring them up, and so he married me and they grew up as good as anything.

They always said if their dad were alive they would never look for him because it's only the man I married they know. They say to me, 'Mum, we can never forget him,' He was like a real father to them, they have a picture of him. He used to look after them and told them not to misbehave in school. He didn't want them to get into trouble. He was a very lovely man. Every time I sit down I look up at the picture of him I say, 'God bless you, you really brought up my children good.'

St Kitts was lovely when I was a little girl. My parents went to Cuba to work before I was born. When they returned from Cuba they bought their property, house and things. So we grew up in a house and travelled out. We shared money and left St Kitts. We travelled to loads of different countries. I was still young.

My mother always used to wake us up in the morning to sweep the yard and fetch the water. One morning she didn't come to wake us up. When I went to her room she was fast asleep, cold like ice. She died of a heart attack. We never threw the people out of the houses she was renting out. My father died before my mother. He was a good man. We were lucky to have good parents. The people liked my mum because she never threw them out when they had no jobs. She always said 'where would they go, they have no money?' My sister always said we had good parents.



*A.M., with her Husband*

My brothers, they travelled to other Countries. So we never had life rough. Our parents used to talk about travelling and the good life, we used to hear them all the time. I haven't been back to St Kitts for a long while. All my children were born there. I always used to go to church on Sundays in Bow. I'll never give up my church. The minister still comes and visits me, doesn't worry me at all. You see I've lived to an old age that my mother never lived to. I'm nearly 87. I've had a good life. My children are fine. They've got good jobs

# LAWRENCE

## The 1948 Olympics

The 1948 Olympics was the first one held after the War. I attended the Games when I wasn't working. I was 22 years old. I caught the tube from Liverpool Street to White City. The Games took place across the road from the underground station.

Most of the events were held in White City. The stadium was a very up-to-date venue for athletics. People had been on rations for food and clothes and there was very little sport during the War, so this gave them a chance to stretch their legs. People also went dog racing in the same grounds - my mum and dad always went to the dog track at White City - and tried to get in the Olympics for free. I can't remember how much it cost for the entrance fee but it was a couple of bob.

The Games gave the people a chance to pick themselves up. I remember Arthur Wint, who ran in the 800 yards, and McDonald Bailey, a sprinter, who ran in the 100 yards. It was called yards then. Now they call it metres. They were both from the West Indies, I can't remember if it was Barbados or Jamaica. I remember also a woman named Fanny Blankers-Koen, a Dutch lady, who won several events including the 100 yards for women.

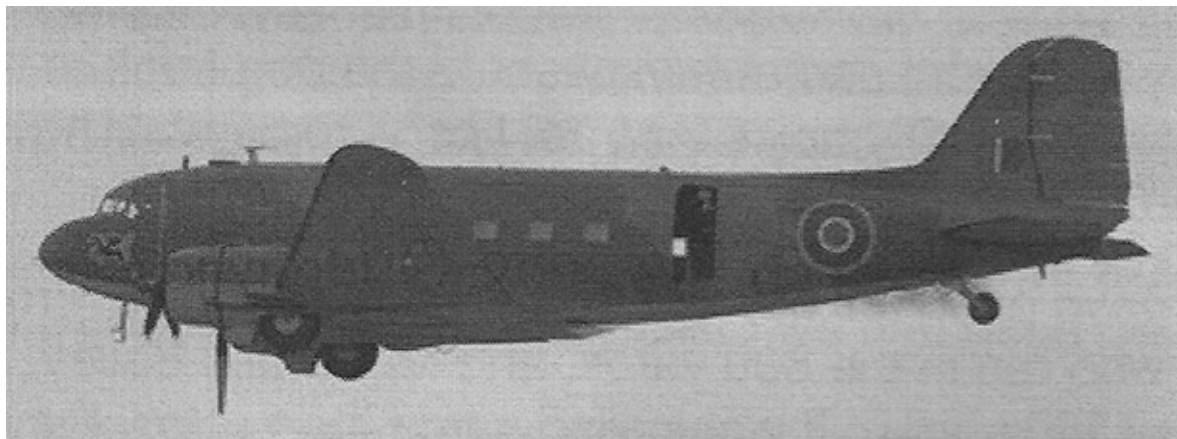


*Fanny Blankers-Koen at the 1948 Olympics*

# ANGELA

## At last I've found you

My first flight from Athens to London took seven days. With tears in my eyes I kissed my mother goodbye. I boarded a Dakota, a British military aeroplane, at Hellinikon aerodrome. There was a long bench all around the belly of the plane, leaving the centre free for tanks, vehicles, weapons, soldiers etc. My destination? To join my then yearly demobbed husband from the RAF in Bolton, Lancashire.



*RAF Dakota*

We first landed in Bari, Eastern Italy. We flew over Vesuvius and down over the Bay of Naples, eight times, to take a good view of the smouldering volcano, and the areas of ancient times, such as Pompeii. Two days on we landed in Rome. We stayed in a nice hotel for four days. The hotel boy took me to see the sights in a landau. I had a photo taken in front of the empty royal palace. The monarchy had ended by referendum in 1946. We then went to the fountain where I threw three coins. We then climbed to the top of the Coliseum. The boy asked me what I thought of Communism. In those days the dreaded 'Communism' was on top of the agenda. I told him to keep away from Lenin and Stalin's idealism, but I agreed on many points with Karl Marx, whose book I had read at the age of fifteen.

Looking down onto the arena the horrifying events of the long gone past appeared in the eyes of our minds. There were Nero, Caligula and many more sadistic Roman emperors entertaining themselves, seeing Christians and those of other creeds, beliefs and even scholars thrown

into an arena to face angry lions and fight to their deaths.

Four days on we landed on the Côte d'Azur. I was sitting next to a distinguished gentleman dressed in a smart grey suit and large grey hat, clutching a portfolio. He introduced himself, adding he was an American negro travelling Europe to attend humanitarian peace conferences.

Our conversation covered many aspects. He was impressed with my way of thinking, so similar to his, me being so young. Then we landed in Marseilles. Approaching the English Channel I was so excited to have a view of the cliffs of Dover - so often sung then by Vera Lynn, but turbulence made me ill. Two airmen wrapped me in a blanket and put me on the floor.

My American friend attended to me until we landed at London airport, where RAF officials dumped me in a wheelchair, gave me some medicine and onto the coach. Sitting next to my friend the conversation continued on the burning subjects of justice, peace, etc. They then took us - us, the young women married to their RAF men - to a cottage, in an empty room with only a long wooden table and benches. They gave us something to eat and then off to bed, still in our day clothes.

Breakfast was sausage and a cup of tea. We were then put into cars when a shadow appeared by the window. It was my friend. 'Ah!' he said, 'at last I've found you,' asking me for my address. I was trying to explain to him that on arrival to Britain I didn't know what I would be faced with, but would he give me his? When suddenly the car took off. My heart sank on seeing the disappointment on his face.

My prediction was right. On arriving in Bolton I was faced with many problems that up to this day the effect is painful.

Did you guess who my friend was? I'll give you a clue.

He was a black American singer, a film star, a stage Shakespearian actor and also an international activist...plus. *(Angela's friend was Paul Robeson)*



*Angela*

# **BIRDIE**

## **I often wondered what happened to Meg**

I remember being a little girl and my brother getting married. I remember each time his wife had a baby my aunt would send me to their place.

The first baby was born over the Christmas holiday. My sister-in-law had a sister. We used to call her Miss Marie and she adopted a girl called Meg. I remember I was eight years old. Meg must have been about five years old. She used to be taught prayers and I remember her mother used to beat her. I could hear the noise and the 'licks' going over that poor child. I can remember hearing the strikes going over her body. I used to worry when it was night time because I knew I would hear her screams. She used to say 'Our father' and would then scream 'Oh-!' This would continue over and over. They used to beat her with a belt. I was lucky. I was a spoilt child and I never got smacked. Some children would get beaten every day.

I didn't go back when I grew up. I often wondered what happened to Meg. I remembered years later talking to a friend called Lola, who went to live in Canada. Lola said she met a lady and spoke to her. Unaware to Lola, and myself at the time, the lady she spoke to was Meg. I eventually found out that she had become an old lady like myself. I've always thought about her as a little girl.

# ROSETTA

## **You've got to stick up for yourself in life**

My mum told me when she was having me she nearly had me on the stairs. She shouted out to my dad 'George, George. It's coming!' My mum was really the best. She used to look after all of us, she was a good mum, and she gave us what we could. She used to keep the last penny for the meter to cook dad's dinner. We didn't have any meals at school. We lived in a house that had two rooms. My mum had fifteen children. She lost most when young, and ended up with seven of us. Money was tight but she did her best to make ends meet. She gave us things she really could not afford. If we wanted anything, like sweets, we used to run errands for people in the street.

On Sundays my dad used to go to Petticoat Lane and buy a bag of fruit and a bag of sweets. He said 'That is to last you lot for the week' (laughs). Sometimes we might be lucky and there might be a chocolate in the sweets. Things were very scarce in those days, and we used to have all the hand-me-downs in the clothes line, from the biggest all the way down, because my mum didn't have the money to buy us new clothes. But we had a very good life. I used to look after a baby to make some extra money.

We had a tin bath. My mother used to boil the water on a gas stove. We had a bath once a week. The cleanest went first, the dirtiest last. I always used to go last. We used to wash the clothes by hand. My job was to clean the silver, the forks and spoons, and then go on to do the polishing and washing the floor. My mum was so good to us all, she was a very good mum. There was a lot of furniture. We had a wireless. I had to go to a shop, in Commercial Road, and get a new accumulator when it needed changing. I don't think I had a bad childhood really. It was no different from any other child. We had a coal fire. We used to collect the coal with buckets from the yard. We lived upstairs. We'd come down, go through the court and into the yard. The toilets were also in the yard. If you were caught short during the night you had to pee into a bucket.

I used to work in the local café during my lunchtime when I was at school.



I used to get half-a-crown a week plus my lunch. When I got the money I gave it to my mum to help out. I went to Broad Street School as an infant. It was a nice school but we had some strict teachers. I remember being in the playground and we were playing touch colour. I think it was touch colour brown. I couldn't find it and so I smacked the teacher's ass (laughs). I thought I was going to get a hiding when I got into the classroom but I didn't. I said 'Sorry, Miss, but I had to touch colour brown.' Another teacher, Miss Wade, a music teacher, caught me talking while she was teaching the class and made me come to the front of the class and asked me to put my arm out and she smacked me on the arm, all the way up and back down again. My arithmetic teacher, Miss Blake, was lovely. I really got on with her. We didn't have the amount of exams the children have today. They do so many. We were taught geography, history and those subjects. We had a desk and seats. My favourite subject was PE and I got good and maths. I can still do mental arithmetic. I was three years old when I started school. We started from nine to twelve and then two until three or four in the afternoon, depending on your age. We used to go home for dinner because there was no school dinners then.



*Bathtime, 1932*

At Christmas time we used to have a tree and help decorate our home and put up nice curtains. We all helped to keep the place clean. We ate well, we had turkey for Christmas. When we were young my Sister Violet and I were given half-a-crown by our mum to buy all the shopping. We used to get a leg of lamb, all the vegetables and other bits and pieces. We used to go to the Old Road, along the Commercial Road. Violet and I used to make eyes at the man who was auctioneering the meat and we used to get it cheaper, sixpence for a leg of lamb, we didn't do bad really.

We used to buy clothes from the second-hand shop because we couldn't afford to buy new ones until we went out to work. We used to play with skipping ropes and hopscotch, and sing songs. Indoors we'd play ludo and snakes and ladders.

My first job was at the Albion Knitwear and that was at Glasshouse Fields. I was making buttons, the material to put onto the buttons. I was getting half-a-crown a week in wages. I asked to go on piece-work and I was earning two pounds, two shillings a week. One poor lady tried to rob me of my money but she chose the wrong person. I said to her that I would see the governor; she apologized and said she'd make it up to me. You've got to stick up for yourself in life. I was there for a while. I was fourteen at the time.

I was seventeen when I joined the ATS. My friend and I were going to join the Land Army but she changed her mind. I wasn't a lover of the land so I joined the ATS. I told them I was eighteen when I joined but I was really seventeen. I was in there for nearly four years. It made me what I am today. I made me really stick up for myself.



# **WILLIAM**

## **My parents were very good people**

I was born in 1924 in Stepney, near Shadwell Park. It was a lovely place then, but it's all spoilt now. We had a tennis court, a bowling green and a football pitch. There was a pub right outside the park. My parents were very good people and I was a happy child. I had a heart murmur and the doctor said with great care I could grow out of it, which I did because my parents were the best.

I left school when I was fourteen, I did not like primary school but I was good at carpentry in senior school. I got a job in Watney Market, the Maypole, where I scrubbed floors, unloaded eggs and got rid of the waste down the chute. When the Maypole was bombed I managed to get another job in Home and Colonial, which was also in Watney Market, and that too got bombed.

At eighteen I joined the Royal Air Force. I went from Paddington to Penrith, South Wales. It was a dump but the food was good. We had training for fifteen weeks, and earned 42 shillings a week. We used to do seven mile runs. We washed our clothes and dried them on the garden wall. We did rifle and foot drill. We were then posted to Peterborough and from there to Blackpool. I was eventually posted to India, where I was the Wing Commander's batman. He was a Senior Medical Officer (SMO). My number was 1830997. We were based in a place called Worley, which was approximately 70 miles from Calcutta. I was in India for four years and I came home in 1944.

I arrived in Blackpool. My parents were overjoyed. I provided food for the household. I will never forget the look on my mother's face on returning home. My parents celebrated the occasion with a half whiskey. I just had a glass of ale.

I married my Cousin Mary, my mother's sister's daughter, when I left the air force. We were together for nearly 50 years. We didn't have any children, we were too old. Mary died from breast cancer. I sometimes sit and cry my eyes out. My father died aged 85 with bladder cancer.

My father had broken all of his teeth as a young man. He worked on a construction site and fell off some scaffolding. His doctor wanted him to wear dentures but he refused. He felt they were artificial. His gums became hardened and he could eat meat better than any of us.

# **ABEDA**

## **I began to feel happier**

I arrived in the UK in 1968 with my husband. I used to stitch lining at home and make clothes. All the Bengali girls used to work at home then. We were not allowed to go out looking for work or to study because our husbands and fathers believed that we would run away with someone else if we were literate and financially independent.

Before meeting my husband I went to school. I enjoyed studying and was eager to learn more, but once married my husband did not allow me to learn any more. I was his second wife and didn't have any children of my own. My husband would often return to Bangladesh and stay there for over a year, sometimes two years, with his first wife and their children. I used to feel bored with him being away for so long. One day I met a Sylheti-speaking Bengali woman who encouraged me to attend English classes and volunteer in a special needs school. After a couple of months I attended the classes and volunteered in the school.

We moved to a flat in Bethnal Green when we first arrived in London and we were the first Bengali family to live on the estate. The neighbours were not very good to us. Children would knock on the door but I would never open it when I was on my own. I used to get scared being on my own when my husband was in Bangladesh. I remember there was one old lady who used to swear at me. Another neighbour had a dog, which frightened me. It wasn't a very nice experience. Then gradually other Bengali families started moving into the building. The other people started to move out including the old lady and I began to feel happier with my new neighbours.

# GEORGINA

## People years ago were more united

When I was nine years old we were evacuated to the country, as well as a lot of other children when the War was on - I remember the date - it was the 3rd of September 1939. I remember being taken to the railway station and there was four big women collecting all the children. We all had our gas masks, which was in a cardboard box, and a bag of clothes. We were put into groups and we were told we were going on a train to the country. We were all standing on the platform looking at each other wondering where we were going to go. We were all very upset as we knew we had to leave our parents behind and a lot of us were crying. There were some women trying to pacify us, telling us it's only for a few days and that everything was going to be alright.



*Children to be evacuated assemble at Poplar School*

The journey to Norfolk took a long time. On arrival we all had to stand in a line. We were told that we would all be placed in different billets. My brother and I were placed with a family who already had three children; my younger sister was placed with a family that lived nearby. My brother ran away and I was left on my own with people I didn't know. My brother was eventually found and brought back to the family. The people were good to us. We were taught how to collect flowers from the woods and how to press them and make little bouquets.

Every day of the week we would be doing different things, though life was very much a routine, especially at bath time, Everyone had to take it in turns to get into the same bath water and the dogs went in last. We were

there for about eighteen months, and we were brought back to London because my mum couldn't keep up with the payments. In those days if one was working they had to give a certain amount to the people who looked after the children. I didn't want to leave as I had a good life in Norfolk, except for the country children who used to call us 'dirty nitty Londoners'. Mum collected us and brought us back home.

After a while we were sent to a different family, as my mum was taken ill. The lady we were placed with was very horrible. We were often left on our own in the house while she went out. We were frightened as the bombs were dropping. She treated her own kids with love, but not us. So one day I decided that we would run away, as I had some money. My brother, sister and I made our way to the railway station thinking that we could buy our tickets and return home. But we were approached by a policeman who told us, 'where do you think you are going?' He found out where we were staying and took us back.



*Evacuees waiting for the train, 1939*

Looking back now, my life as a child was happy even though I had different experiences. What I find is people years ago were more united. Life is so different today.

# ROSANNA

## Every new day is a bonus

I was born in Dublin on June 27th, 1910. I had four brothers and three sisters. My mother had another girl - her first child - but she died soon after she was born. They called her Rosanna and I was named after her.

Ireland was occupied by the British in those days and you would often see soldiers on the streets. There was a lot of unrest and looting going on with every Tom, Dick and Harry breaking into shops and thieving. I remember in 1916, when I was six, one of my brothers brought back a lovely doll for me. I was over the moon as it was the first doll I'd ever had. The next day I was sitting on the front step when the soldiers came around on patrol. They had guns and one of them asked me who gave me the doll. I said 'My brother gave it to me.' The soldier replied, 'That doll's not yours. It's been stolen!' He then snatched it off me and threw it on the back of the horse-drawn lorry. I started crying and shouted for my father, who as a very religious man, wagged his finger at me and said 'That dolly wasn't yours. It was stolen! You'd no right to keep it!' I never forgave him for not sticking up for me. When my mother came home she said she would make me a rag doll from old coats and buttons and then that Christmas she bought me a brand-new doll.

My mother was a very kind woman. We didn't have much money for clothes but she always made sure we had enough to eat. She made lovely soup in a big pot on the hob and neighbours' children often came round for a bowl of nourishing soup.

I went to Russell Street Catholic School. I was happy there till I left after an incident when I was eleven. I was sitting in the school church with two other girls. One of them kept whispering and chatting during the service. Afterwards one of the teachers blamed me for the noise when I hadn't said a word. She wanted to cane me on the hand but I refused to put my hand out. I was always strong-willed and wasn't going to be caned for something I didn't do. I ran home and told my mother who agreed I didn't have to go back to that school. My mother then sent me to private school but the fees were too much and I left after a month or two.



And so I had to get a job. My first job was with the Carmelite order of nuns. I had to work on the land, digging potatoes and cabbages and picking strawberries in the summer. I earned half-a-crown a day. I gave my mother ten shillings and was allowed to keep half-a-crown for myself. I was pleased as Punch.

My other major memory from childhood involves my father. He used to work for the railway, delivering parcels by horse and cart. I used to like to make a fuss of Scissors, the horse. One day my father overheard one of my sisters arguing and bickering. He lost his temper, took my pants down and thrashed me with his leather belt. I ran upstairs, crying my eyes out. When my mother came home I could hear my sister telling her what had happened. When she came upstairs and saw the welts he had made on my bottom with his belt, she was furious. She flew downstairs and, during a row she had with my father, hit him over the head with a washboard which split in two. My father's head was pouring with blood. My brother had to take him to the hospital where he had six stitches put in his head. My mother had been meaning to get a new one as the old one had a crack in it!

I never spoke to my father again after that. He lived for the church and went to mass seven days a week. When I used to bring friends home he would badger them to give money to the church. But for all his pontificating and his airs and graces, he didn't really help bring us up. That was left to my mother.

I got married in 1931. My husband came from West Ealing, though we met in Dublin. He was a chauffeur and his mother, who came from Budleigh Salterton in Devon, was what they used to call a lady's companion. I got on well with her and she came to live with us when she was an old lady. Our first four children were born in Ireland (I lost another baby that was growing on the outside of my womb). My husband moved over to England for work and I joined him in Birmingham in 1939. The four children stayed behind in Ireland and were looked after by my Sister.

During the War I had to work in a factory that made parts for aeroplanes, working from seven am to seven pm. It was hard work but I had a lot of laughs with the other girls. Birmingham was badly bombed. A niece of

mine lost four of her children when their street was bombed. Only my Niece and the baby that was sitting on her knee at the time survived.

I had a daughter after the War in 1946. My husband and I were having a few problems at the time and we separated. I was homeless for a while and spend two nights sleeping in a park while I was still breastfeeding my baby daughter. Then a friend let us stay in his attic and I managed to get a job as a cleaner in a pub. The landlord let me take my daughter into work with me. Times were very hard. One of my brothers would send food parcels over from Ireland for me. I remember once he sent some steak but when I opened the parcel it was crawling with maggots. I ended up in hospital after having a bad haemorrhage. While I was in hospital I became friends with a woman who had just lost a baby. She would look after my daughter while I was having treatment and I could see that she was a caring woman. When she asked if she could adopt my Daughter I agreed because I couldn't see how I could look after her on my own, with no job and no place to live. I thought she would have a better chance in life if I gave her up for adoption.

I got back together with my husband eventually and we moved down to London and rented a two-bedroom flat in Euston where my four other children joined us. We then moved to a bigger place on Bethnal Green Road, opposite the red stone church where we lived for the next 30 years. I got a job in catering as a mobile relief worker covering 27 canteens. I had to cover all different types of jobs: cook, cook's assistant, cashier, etc, wherever they were short-staffed, I stayed in that job till I retired aged 66.

I had some great holidays with my husband, We had one of those old Ford cars that had a handle on the front that needed turning to get the car to start on a cold morning. We would go touring and stay in a tent. We travelled all over the place, from Lands End to John O' Groats, I used to go back to Ireland for holidays when I was younger but my brothers and sisters are all dead now and I wouldn't want to go back again. I feel like a Londoner now after living here for 65 years.

My husband died aged 64. After I finished working in 1976 I started going to bingo three to four times a week in Stratford. I made a lot of friends

there who I would meet for a bite to eat before the bingo started. I only stopped going two or three years ago when I couldn't see to mark the card. I also used to enjoy getting the bus and going to the West End for a look around.

I had a heart attack when I was 93 and had to have a pacemaker fitted. I told the consultant I was too old to have such a thing done but he told me that he had fitted one to a woman of 100 and she lived to be 106. He said if I had a pacemaker fitted I could reach to 100 myself, which I have. They tried to send me home after three weeks but I refused to go as I was living on my own with a home help just coming once a week to do a bit of cleaning. The doctor's jaw dropped and he said, 'OK, I'll sort something out,' He was true to his word and arranged for me to convalesce at Mile End for three weeks. I've always been strong willed

I had a great 100th birthday this year, though I think it's taken a lot out of me as I've not been too well since. I've got three children (two of my daughters have died), eighteen grandchildren, twenty-seven great grandchildren and four great-great-grandchildren. I often go down to stay with my daughter and her husband in Kent, which makes a nice break for me.

People often ask me what is the secret of living to such a big age. I don't really know. I never drank, smoked or went with bad men. And I've tried to be kind to people. There's got to be give and take as well to make a marriage work. I try to do as much as I can - I still do my own dusting and I've been cleaning my own windows since my last window cleaner jumped off a roof and committed suicide two years ago. I do my own meals still. I do miss not being able to get out on my own any more, but I've got a lot to be thankful for. I wake up in the morning thinking every new day is a bonus.

# ANNIE

## **They used to love to hear me talk cockney**

I was born in the East End: Dunston Building in Stepney. My mother was a rope maker, which she got from a factory. It was like tarpaulin, and my father was a docker all his life. We then moved to Truck Hall, a street just off Cable Street. I had six brothers and sisters. We lived in a large house. We had the upstairs part, which had two bedrooms and a scullery. Downstairs there was another lady, she had three children. In the back room there was another couple. It was a five-bedroom house and everyone had their own rooms.

I went to Jonson Street School and left when I was fourteen. After I left school I remember going to one of the Docks and putting flat almond nuts and dates in packs. I earned ten shillings a week. To get there from Trunk Hall, we used to wait for a cart to come along. It had no sides and we used to jump on for a lift to work.

From there I worked in a chocolate factory in Denmark Street, packing chocolate this was during Christmas. We weren't allowed to eat any but we used to do things behind the manageress's back. We used to get a packet of chocolate with our wages and we were also searched before leaving. I remember one day we were all looking out the factory window one afternoon hearing a noise. It was a big Zeppelin 101.

When I got a little older we used to go drinking down Limehouse. This particular pub shut at 10pm. From there we used to leave a bit early and get a bus to go to another pub in the Minories, they were open until 11pm.

My favourite tippie was brown ale. We only had enough money for one drink each. We used to have a lot of parties in the pub.

I remember there used to be a basement and every Saturday there was a party. One Saturday night there was a fellow from Liverpool. I never really went out with him, but I knew him because he used to drink with the boys. It was at a party at one of the boy's houses. Afterwards we all went to

Euston Station to see him off. Anyway, when the train came in he got hold of my hand and pulled me in the coach with him and I ended up in Liverpool. My mum and family didn't know where I was and were trying to find me. I was too frightened to come back to face everybody, so we got married there.

My husband's name was Christopher. We later had a baby, and then War started. I didn't come back to London until after the War. My sisters used to come and visit me. Life in Liverpool was different. They spoke differently. I could hardly understand them, but they used to love to hear me talk cockney.

During the War I was bombed out twice in the place we lived, and we then moved nearer to the Docks. We got bombed quite often there. Rationing wasn't too bad for us because there was a lot of fiddling going on and we knew a lot of the dockers. They used to get us different things. I remember one night we were bombed whilst in bed and had to get up in a hurry to go to the shelter. I was in my nightgown, coat and all my underclothes in my arms, and as we were running to the shelter I was dropping all my knickers along the way. I ended up with no knickers. I don't think I was the only one.

My husband was a seaman, I hardly saw him. He was a bit of a drinker and worked on the docks. There was a lot of fiddling going on, especially with the rum from the ships.

The bombing was very bad. I was bad in London too. A lot of people were killed. We came back to London after the War and got a two-room place, bedroom and lounge, in Cable Street. We later got a new flat in the place where I live today on Dunelm Street. I've lived here since 1950.

My father passed away first. Then my mum had a stroke. My elder sister never got married. Both my parents had a good sense of humour. The older women used to go to the pub then. I remember when we were kids she used to give us money to buy cakes. My husband ended up with cancer, he was ill for a long while. I can't remember which hospital he died in. I had one son, Lou. I think it would have been nice to have a daughter.

I used to go to the pubs as a teenager to Algate and the Minorities. Everywhere was so alive, it's different altogether now. I couldn't afford to go on holiday. We used to go 'hopping' with our mother when younger. I remember we used to wait for the hopping letter from the postman. He used to come around delivering letters between 9 to 10pm at night. We used to walk to London Bridge, which would be packed. We reached London Bridge around midnight for the train. Once on the train we'd sit under our mum's long wide skirt, my sister and I. My brother sat under another lady's skirt. The tickets were inspected while we hid. We only came out after the train left.

We arrived at 4am, and then were transported by horse and cart to the farm. The farm had four hopping huts attached to it. We had to walk down a long land to collect the water. We used to stay hop picking for two to three weeks. At the end of it our farmer used to throw money in the air for the kids.



*Top: Hop pickers from the East End, 1930s. Bottom: Annie makes friends with a parrot. Plus (more recently) a snake!*

# SARAH

## **My mum was the Queen in the market**

My mother had nine children. I'm the last. They didn't want me to go to school. I had lots of brother in the family. My mother told me I shouldn't go to school because the teachers would beat me, so wherever my mum went I went with her.

On Sunday mornings we all had to go to church. There was a new priest and he asked my mum whether or not I attended school. My mum explained why I didn't; he wasn't very happy. He managed to convince my mother that I should attend school and that he would personally arrange it. I was about six or seven years old and remember crying all day in classroom and not wanting to go back the next day. My teacher talked to me about learning new things, which helped me a lot. After three months I would go to school on my own.

Back in Ghana, in those days we had mud houses. Ours had about four rooms. The boys used to sleep separately from the girls and we only ate as a family on Saturdays and Sundays. On weekdays everyone would be working in the market. My mum was the Queen in the market. The women would run and organise the market. She used to sell fish. The people who lived near the sea would bring the fish to the market for her to sell and mum would f them a place to sleep before they returned. The unsold fish was smoked in our home. My mother would employ people to work for her. They used to help her sell the fish, clean the home and cook for us.

We didn't have electricity but had a little lamp instead, but we used to have lots of fun. All the girls used to hold hands make a circle and clap and dance. It was called 'Arrup'. There was no television either but we were very happy. The boys would go to school too but my big sister wasn't very happy. She had lots of regrets.

When I was a teenager my sister had a baby. I was still at school. I remember one day leaving school early without permission visit her in hospital. I forgot to take my books and homework with me. The next

morning all the other children brought their books with their homework complete. The teacher asked me for mine. I replied that I didn't have any homework. They found out that I'd left school early the previous day. I received six lashes on my bum. I was made to lie on a table face down and was given the cane. I couldn't sit down properly for a while after.



# MR RAHMAN

## A significant change

I am 70 now and I was born some time in 1940. I came to Britain in 1960 and started living in Blackburn in the North of England. I lived in Blackburn for ten years before I moved to London permanently. I've been living in Tower Hamlets ever since I left Blackburn, particularly in the E1 area. I used to live in Cannon Street when I moved to London before I finally settled myself where I am living now on Umberston Street, off Commercial Road, for over 30 years.

Britain was a poorly developed country when I first came here 50 years ago. London had a small amount of population and lacked well maintained roads and streets and needed new roads constructed and more communication facilities and housed.

I can remember the prime minister, Mr Wilson, who initiated the actual development of Britain and London from 1967 or some time round then. He was a Labour prime minister and he started the actual groundwork of development and because he was Labour he genuinely worked well. There was another prime minister named Heath, Mr Heath, at that time and he didn't work, he actually did nothing. He was a Conservative. They don't work.

I still have a strong sense of politics. I personally know Helal Abbas who was Labour candidate (in the Tower Hamlets mayoral election recently) and I wish him well. I was not unhappy when Lutfur Rahman won the election to be elected mayor of Tower Hamlets because when a Bangladeshi man becomes mayor, I am happy with that achievement. I watch television and follow Bangla news almost every day.

It was hard work when we came because we had to work in factories which involved a lot of physical work. I worked in a cotton factory in Blackburn when I came to Britain in 1960. I earned five to six pounds a week when I started and had to work a minimum of 48 hours a week then. It has changed now, people work 40 hours a week now. I took a training for six months in a weaving mill there to help me earn more

money. After the training I started earning £32 a month or more, which was good money then. A pound was differently valued then, a quarter of a pound would do for food.

People used to be well behaved then. They treated us well although we were from Asia.

# LESLIE

## Where's the justice in that?

I lived with my parents. We had no money for the gas machine so we used to rub down the pennies to use for the meter. It was supposed to be a shilling. The gas man used to give it back so that we could use them again instead of confiscating the money. At the age of six, I was going to the bookies to put a sixpence bet for my aunty, who would then go and collect the winnings.

I was about eight years old, my mother was going to have a baby. I went around the back of the shops, just walking around, and I saw the milk van parked outside a shop called 'Berties' in Liverpool.

Anyway, the milkman went around the back and I've seen his bag, which had been left on the seat. I knew me mum had no money so I grabbed hold of the bag and ran. There was nobody about as it was early, about eight am. I looked in the bag and there were tuppenny bits in it, pennies, halfpennies and a couple of sixpences.



*Leslie as a young boy*

There was plenty of money in the bag. He couldn't carry it around because it was too heavy and he had to carry crates of milk about, so he left the bag of money on the seat, and I nicked it. I took it home, ran upstairs with it, me mam was in bed, the midwife was there and I stuck it under her pillow. I went back downstairs while she was having the baby. She had a baby girl, my sister Ann. After I went back upstairs she asked what I'd put under her pillow. 'I've got you something,' I replied. I pulled the bag out and poured all the money out on the bed, in total there was about fifteen pounds, which paid for a lot of nappies, food and that. It was hard. The old man was on the parish, that's the dole now. There used to be the parish, church parish, we used to go there every week and get

money. My mum didn't ask me where I got the money until later.

At the age of twelve I got into trouble and was sent to approved schools. Bessie Braddock, she was the magistrate and also MP for Liverpool, sent me away to approved school for stealing. This followed being sent, by her, to the local 'nut house' for six weeks for tests on my brain. There were all sorts in there. They wired me up and gave me the shock treatment. It done me more harm than good.

I was in approved school for three years between the ages of twelve to fifteen. It was alright there, plenty of carrying on and pillow fights and that in the bleeding dormitories. We used to nip down the fire escape stairs in the apple orchards and grab hold of all the bleeding apples and pears, and then get back to the dormitories and eat them all. Funny enough everybody had a belly ache the next morning. Yeah, we were all running to the toilet and everything. Then the headmaster had us all lined up and asked 'Who was the man that nicked the apples last night?' A couple of them gave themselves up. I gave myself up. We got six of the best on the arse, on the bum, I mean. They used to put me in these khaki shorts, dead tight, you couldn't put anything in them, not like you see in the films, where kids put books down their pants. You couldn't do none of that. You was bent over in front and he used to run. The headmaster used to run, he was about twenty-six stone, big man, fat he was. Then whack - he used to knock you to the bleeding windows. Wow, you had black and blue stripes on your bum for at least a week or more, you know what I mean, you couldn't sit down for that week, you had to sit down on a sheet because it was hurting that bad. I was there for three years.

After I got out I could read and write. I was 'sagging' (stealing) all the time. I went to school on and off before. The education board man used to come around every day, with his big f—— book. 'He (referring to me) hasn't been in for the last week. Get him in school!' My mum used to take me then but I used to run away. I was out all the time.

They used to allocate you in them days, top security Borstal me and I did nothing wrong! All I done was nick a couple of cars to drive and that. Taking and driving away is a worse offence than rape. Because you went in front of a parole board a rapist got parole, and I got knocked back for

nicking a couple of cars! Where's the justice in that? You know what I mean.

I done two years eight months. A screw called Mr Heskey - he was only young - was in charge of us. I knew the Governor used to like a little tippie. He used to have a bottle in his drawer. I used to have a little nip, but then he started marking it. He got wise to it. So I used to put water in it, after having some. It was gin. I didn't like gin that much but it was alcohol. Anyway, I noticed the keys in his drawer, so I took his keys and planted them in the garden near a tree. Later on they were all in a meeting (the Governor and wardens, etc), and we were having dinner. Then all the alarms went off, everybody was banged up. The screws were at my door. Everyone was taken out and lined up. I asked what was the matter? They replied, 'You know, get downstairs'. We went down. 'You know you took the keys?' they asked. I said I never took the bleeding keys. 'You was the only one who's been in the office today. No one's going out tomorrow until the keys are found.' Twenty people were due to go out the following day. He (the Governor) added that they would all have to change all the locks and that I would be going to prison in Reading, a place where they used to send all the naughty boys. It was a terrible place. People used to get beaten up and everything down there.

Anyway, the following day Heskey, the screw came in and said 'Come on, you're going to get in bleeding trouble, I'm in trouble, as it is, for letting you in the place without me being there.' In the end I told him. I went in front of the Governor. There were two screws standing behind me, two screws standing in front. He asked 'If you give me the keys now we won't do anything to you. You can go back in the wing and that will be the end of the story.' I gave them back. I told them where the keys were - by the tree. I only took the keys for a laugh. I had no intention of escaping. Anyway they put me in a cell. These two screws came in and one of them beat me up! Heskey came in and stopped it. He told them that I'd given back the keys and I'd nearly done me bird (sentence). I was surprised. I thought they were going to send me to Reading. You can't really trust them, you what I mean!

I came out of there and later went to prison - did a couple of prison sentences for thieving. Me brother was a screw, a prison officer, and he was

in Walton at the time. So when I went there he had to report to the Governor that I was in there: I was his brother.

They sent me to Manchester, Strangeways, as that was the other nearest prison. What a bleeding prison that was, murder. I was there for five years for stealing postal orders and cash from the post office. You see, in them days post office was no go. If you robbed a post office you were guaranteed a sentence. If you robbed with a shotgun you'd get life in prison. I've government money, you see. A lot of gangs used to get thirty years. That was the reason because it's Government money. Those idiot MPs wanted to show to the people that they wanted to make examples out of robbers. They then transferred me to Preston for six weeks. I left there after six weeks and they put me in Kirkham, an open prison in Blackpool. It was lovely there, it was. You could go out for the day with a group and then come back again later that night. We were up at six-thirty am in the morning.

My last sentence was when I was about thirty years old. The screw said I would be back, I said, 'I f—— won't! Excuse me for swearing. I've never seen that screw to this day and I've never been back in prison. I've been down here for thirty-two years now. I've never even had a parking ticket. I came down to London. Me sister was married and I stayed with her. I haven't been back to Liverpool since.

I got a job down here on the building and never looked back. I used to work on the hotels, the Hilton and all that. OK, alright, I've nicked a few things messing about but I've never been nicked for it. I've worked in the Ritz Hotel, down Piccadilly, for about two years, doing it all up. They were throwing out brand-new mattresses, televisions. They were throwing out the lot for new furniture, everything had to be new. So what I done was I hired a van from just down the road from a place called Hinds. We all mucked in together, paid for the hire of the vehicle and took the unwanted furniture to a garage and a bloke bought the lot of it from us, all second-hand. We were getting £50 for the TVs, £30 for the mattresses. We had a good piss-up that night, we all got pissed. We weren't doing anything wrong because they were throwing them out, getting rid of them.

We were all over the place, different jobs, having a laugh, I used to get in

at night time, me sister never used to see me. I used to get up in the morning, work and then get in the boozier. That's how I got ill really, that's how I got this bleeding heart attack, because of the booze, the smoking, that's what caused it. I've stopped drinking. Yeah, I haven't had a drink for two years. I'm still smoking. If I give them up as well - I know I should do - what will I have? I've got nothing. All I've got is me racing and me television. I've got nothing really to do. No sex or nothing like that.

# MARION

## During the War people had very good spirits

The people who were able to afford to pay used to go on holiday to the seaside. Those who couldn't used to go to the country for a week. I have a photo taken during a school holiday in Seaford, Sussex, in 1934 when I was twelve years old. We had our very own chalets. About 40 to 50 girls went every year for one week. I can recall one girl from the photograph.

War broke out on 3rd September 1939. I was sixteen years old. I spent my seventeenth birthday in a war shelter, so I couldn't really celebrate it. We lived in Gauston Street, Aldgate, at the time. It was a very old building. The house was bombed on my eighteenth birthday. I lost all my presents. Luckily we was in the shelter, which was in the basement of the Spillers' Building in Houndsditch when it happened. We was very lucky to be alive. I believe they (the German bombers) were trying to bomb the Tower and the Docks. Our neighbours' house wasn't bombed so we used to wash and clean there.

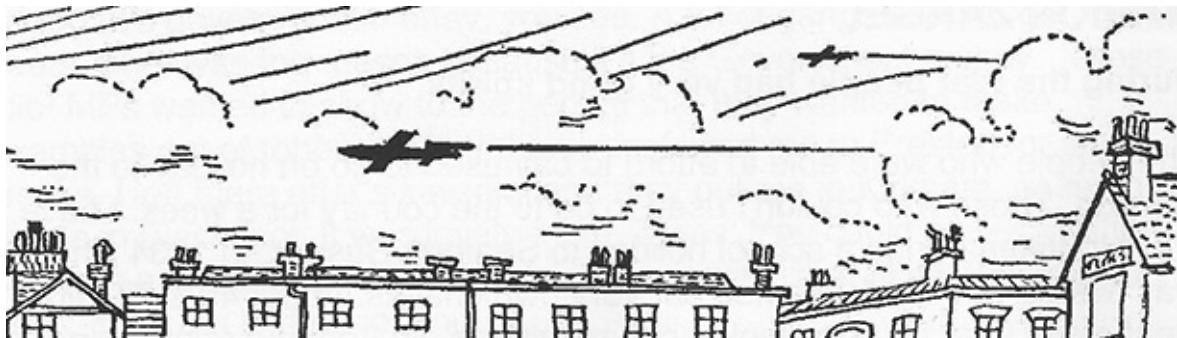


*Bomb damage, 1941*

I worked as a shorthand typist in Covent Garden, working for the Ministry or Supply as a qualified typist. I took the number fifteen bus. I remember the fare used to cost two old pence. I also took part in fire-watching duty once a month. We used to finish work at four pm and head straight to the air-shelter when the bombing was bad.



During the War people had very good spirits and helped one another. We still did all the normal things. I remember going dancing in the Astoria, Tottenham Court Road, and staying until four am. We used to meet American soldiers who kindly took us back to the shelter after the dance and then returned to their billets. We walked home and could often hear the bombs dropping in the distance and the warning alarm of the air-raid sirens. The doodle bombs were the most dangerous. You could hear them. I remember one night the city got fire bombed and we had to leave our shelter in Houndsditch to Spitalfields, which wasn't too far, to our new shelter. I remember the London sky was alight. We lived on rations but we managed to get by.



*Doodlebugs over Whitechapel*

In 1943 we moved to Dron House in Stepney. I had my 21st Birthday and we had a big party. We finally defeated the Germans in May 1945, and had a big celebration (VE Day). When the War was over I went to Belgium for my 23rd birthday with my friend. We had a wonderful holiday there and we treated ourselves to chocolate, cakes, oranges and bananas: all the things we didn't have during the War.

There were marches against Oswald Moseley's Blackshirts during the 1930's in East London. My uncle used to attend the anti-fascist marches. But this was something the children weren't told about. If there was a discussion about them, the Blackshirts, we were told to go out and play.

# ELSIE

## Some family photos

It was 1940, we were blasted out from Jersey Street where we lived. At the same time a land-mine hit the school on Wolverley Street. I was staying with my mum and dad at the time because my husband had been called up for service three months earlier. I remember all the Docks were lit up. The Germans used incendiary devices, which was harder to detect. A lot of people felt that they weren't receiving enough help during the bombing, because the fire brigade were anxious that St Paul's would not be destroyed while the Docks and surrounding areas continued to burn.

We had to use the school for shelter. A lot of people were re-housed to Tottenham and Dagenham because of the debris. Our family couldn't go anywhere because my sister, Ivy, was very ill in Bethnal Green Hospital. She had a heart problem and died three weeks later through shock, following another night of bombs.



*Bethnal Green Hospital*

My parents were eventually re-housed and moved to Treadway Street. By then I had my daughter and we moved in with them. My brother, Jim, was posted to Dunkirk and we soon heard the bad news that he had been taken prisoner-of-war. In August that year my aunty died when sheltering in Chippendale Street in Hoxton. My other brother, Bert, who was serving with the Royal Engineers, died in a serious accident in Gibraltar. He was buried with full military honours. My other sister, Lillian, was in the land army, based in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, and used to visit us when off duty. She should have returned but was given extended leave to stay with the family. I had moved to a new house following the birth of my son, Tony.

On the 15th November 1944, Lillian and I were walking towards the place where I lived. We heard the air-raid siren. Lillian decided to return to our parents' house to be with them. I headed home. At seven-thirty am the following morning, I heard the all-clear alarm and headed off to where my parents lived. When I arrived there was nothing left but rubble. The police wouldn't let me go near the site and held me back against my will. There was a lot of smoke and dust. I saw a person's arm sticking out in the heap. It was the next door neighbour. My dad's body had been blown onto the fire. My mother, was discovered missing limbs (her arms and legs), was found two days later. She had been buried alive. Lillian was found buried in bed, buried alive also, suffocated. She was 21 years old. They were buried on the 24th November 1944 in Bow Cemetery. Some family photos were found among the carnage during the search for Mum.

My Brother Jim was transferred to Poland, as a prisoner-of-war, where he remained until the War ended. After the War, Kim returned home but never talked about his experiences of the War.



*Elsie*

## I.C.

### I was never afraid

In 1960 my husband came over on his own to work for London Transport. I joined him in 1961 with our four daughters. We came on the Begona. It was a lovely liner. The ship's steward was a kind man and even gave a baby chair for Jean, who was not yet two years old. During the journey some men tried to highjack the ship and take us prisoners for their God. They were followers of Haille Sellasse, but the crew managed to prevent the attempted highjack and rounded them up. One of them got 'funny' with me. I said to him 'If you put your hands on me, this ship will never reach England.' I was never afraid. They were eventually handed over to the police.

It was a lovely warm and sunny evening when we landed in London. We went to stay with my husband's sister. I settled in very well and made some nice friends. One in particular was an English white lady named Mrs Lester. She was a welfare worker and her husband was a lawyer. She was a blessed one, she helped me get my older children into school, and when the last one started nursery I was able to go to work. I worked for London Transport in the canteen at Bow Garage.



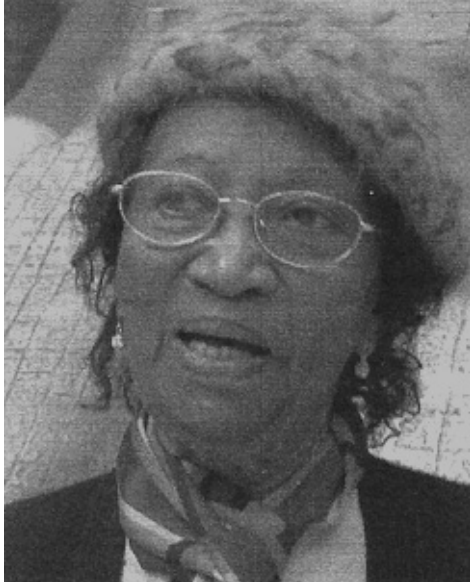
We eventually moved into a flat that my sister-in-law got for us. The landlord, Mr Mason, was a man who looked down on us because he was a Jamaican and we were from the small islands. The flat had rat- and mouse-droppings and was not well looked after. Mrs Lester used to come and visit me there. The landlord did not like that at all.

One day he did a very bad thing. He turned off our gas supply. So I went to where the meter was at the top of the stairs. I stood on a chair and tried to turn it back on. Mr Mason tried to pull the chair from under me but I held on. It then crossed my mind to let the chair go. So I did and he toppled to the bottom of the stairs. His wife was screaming 'Call the police!' I encouraged her to call them, which she did. The police came. I told them Mr Mason had turned off my gas supply and that I had put money in the meter because my children needed to be fed. They took my side and turned on the gas for me. I would not let anyone take advantage of me, especially my children.

Once I had to confront a park keeper and his wife, who were encouraging other children to fight mine. Another time I had to go downstairs to the laundrette because the adults would not let my children use the facilities. They shooed them away. Then I went to a bullyboy's house to complain to his mother about his behaviour. I told her that this would be the only time that I will come to the door, meaning that it would be someone else next time. She slammed the door in my face.

Following my disagreement with Mr Mason, he couldn't wait to get rid of us. He got an eviction order for us to appear at Marylebone Magistrates' Court, but when the day for the hearing came he decided he wanted to settle the dispute out of court. I said no, because I knew if I did he would not let us back into the flat and we would have no court to fall back on. We were given six weeks' notice of eviction. This was fine for me. Mrs Lester began to help me find accommodation with the London County Council. We eventually got a lovely place in Morning Lane. It was a hostel, but we had our own room and kitchen facilities. We were also provided with breakfast and evening meals. At that time husbands could not live in hostels - only women with children were allowed - but Mrs Lester saw to it that my husband could live with us too.

Mr Lester was also kind enough to offer his services any time we needed them. The Lesters had two sons - one of the sons is now a lawyer - and one daughter. We kept in touch down the years, and a few years ago, when Mrs Lester died, they informed me. I will never forget her.



*I.C.*

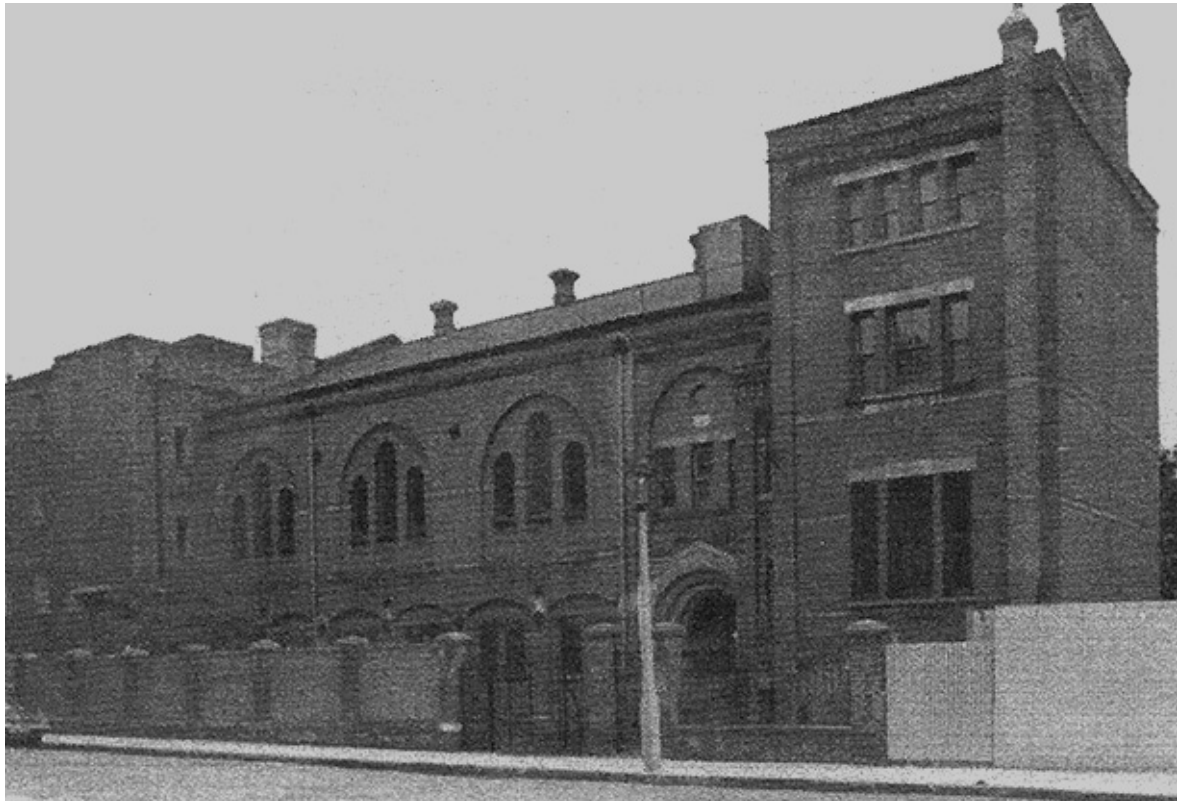
I had to give up working in the canteen following a knee replacement and went on to work in several factories. Although I was only in my forties and told I was too young, the doctors had to operate on my knee because it was so painful. I had my first knee operation at the Royal London Hospital and twelve years later I had another operation on the same knee, this time in St Andrew's Hospital. The factory jobs were better for me because I didn't have to run around like in the canteen.

I've been back to St Kitts several times over the years to see my mother and she's come here to visit me. I also went to Canada in 2007 to visit my sister who is not a retired nurse.

# RAYNER

## **I come from a poor family but was a rich child**

A synagogue, that's where I was married: Rectory Square, Stepney Green, June 1939, just before the War. In 1940 I had a daughter: she will be 70 on June 20th. Seven years later I had another daughter: she will be 64 in June.



*Rectory Square Synagogue*

During the War my husband joined the army. I had Ivy, my eldest daughter, in Mile End Hospital. My husband was away for six years. I lived first in Windsor, and then moved to Bow and then to Mile End, near my family. I shared a house in Approach Road, with my mother-in-law. I once put my eldest to bed in her cot and a bomb hit us. My daughter's cot ended up near the old chest hospital, with her inside. We thought she was dead. The nuns eventually found her, bathed and dressed her. She only had a couple of scratches. I remained unscathed throughout the War. My father-in-law however was not so lucky. I had to take him to the old Bethnal Green Hospital to have shrapnel removed from a head wound. My husband was wounded. They took the muscle out of his arm and he eventually returned to the army.

My mother had ten daughters, including me, and one son. I was the baby. My sister Edie was the youngest in age to me. She was born during the First World War. There's a seven year age difference between us. She eventually moved to Australia. When my mother was fifty or fifty-one she thought that there was something wrong with her. She went to Mile End Hospital. The doctor used to call her Phoebe. He said 'I'm sorry Phoebe, you haven't got a growth but you are pregnant.' That's how I was born. As the baby I got everything. I come from a poor family but was a rich child. If one sister didn't give me something, another would.

My father died at sixty. I was a little girl and can't remember much about him. I remember him getting buried. I remember my sister buying a pram. It was called a bassinette. There were three babies in that pram and I was one of the other two's aunty. I was younger than some of my nieces and nephews. I remember I went to school with two of them: Barbara and Rebecca. Barbara and I used to play with the boys in the street. We found a court in Ernest Street, near Whitehorse Lane. We used to kiss the boys. We wouldn't take Rebecca (Becky) because she had too much of a mouth and used to run after and kiss the boys.

My mother always used to give me three rolls for lunch: one for each of us. If my mother had enough money we'd have cheese in it. I have Barbara her roll but I wouldn't give it to Becky. Then Becky started. Miss Anderson, who was the headmistress of Ben Jonson School, came up to me and said 'Rayner! Why is Becky crying?' I said 'Because I won't give her her roll.' She replied 'You either give her the roll or we'll take your roll away.' So I had to give Becky her roll. I had a terrible temper.

My sister Lilly, Becky's mother, had thirteen children. Most of them died. She had beautiful-looking children. Becky was beautiful. Lilly loved me more than anything you could imagine. I didn't like school, that's why I can't spell to this day. I can spell money and I'm a good reader. She used to take me to the Pictures in Whitechapel instead of going to school. We used to talk in back slang. I remember one time being in the cinema with Lilly. My brother who was a tailor was lining up for work outside Whitechapel Station. There wasn't always a demand for work and the tailors had to line up and be chosen. I remember later at home he hit me on the back of my head. My mother asked 'Why did you do that?'



‘Because she was in the Pictures and didn’t go to school,’ he replied.  
‘Well, you should have been at work!’

All my sisters had lots of children, loads of babies. I used to say to them ‘If you give me a penny, I’ll scrub your passage for you.’ I could get anything I wanted from my sisters because I was the baby. My sister Sarah once bought a fairy cycle from Lower Road Market, in Whitechapel Lane, from Mr Gold’s toyshop. Teddy Monaghue, he was a mental boy. One day I was on the cycle when my mother heard me scream. Teddy Monaghue, lovely family, had pushed me underneath a horse. They all rushed to me. One of the Mr Beaches pulled me from under the horse. There was two Mr Beaches, they were brothers. One used to drink and the other was a good man. After that my mother said ‘Right, no more fairy cycles’. My sister came out of the house. My mother said, ‘Through you, she nearly got killed!’ We sold the bike to Mrs Barber’s grocery shop. I bought two velvet dresses with the money I sold the bike for. I went to school like a rich girl, but I wasn’t rich at all.

Years ago the men in Early Street used to take the horses over to ‘the Cut’ in Burdett Road to pull the barges along the water. They used to leave the horses down the street, go home for lunch and then take the horses back to the Cut. The nurses at the old London Hospital used to wear caps like old soup ladies. If you saw a bag you knew she was a maternity nurse. Most of the children were born at home.



*Canal horse, Bethnal Green*

I remember helping my brother decorate the kitchen for my mum. I would pawn my new shoes, get half-a-crown and a ticket, and buy some wallpaper. I used to paste it and my brother would do the rest. I’d also wash the lace curtains. I would clean the kitchen, the windows, and would do the painting. I’ve always loved doing housework.

I used to go to school with the Wagners. Mr Wagner, my future father-in-law, taught my sister Rosie tailoring. My family knew the Wagners before I was born. I used to go to school with my future husband.

My father-in-law didn't like the idea of mixed marriages. My father was Portuguese, but English, and my mum was Dutch-English.

In those days we had a big house in Ernest Street with six rooms, though we didn't have a sink, but had a coal fire in the kitchen. My mother asked the agent of the landlord, Mr Benjibow, for houses for my sisters as soon as one became available. My mother always gave him a cup of coffee and fish. It was a lovely neighbourhood. I also used to wash the clothes of the local police for tuppence a night.

I had a marvellous life. But when I got married and the War started....

I don't want to go through that now, it's not worth it. My husband was only 44 when he died. I've been a widow for 48 years in July. I went to school with him, we were married for twenty years, and then he dies. What can I do?

There was a butcher's where you could get seven saveloys for sixpence. The butcher always gave us pease pudding with the saveloys. Edie, my sister, was jealous of me because she wanted to be the youngest in the family.

I remember there used to be two picture palaces in Mile End, the Coliseum and the Palladium. My sister Rose would always try to get in for nothing. The back of one of the cinemas used to be opposite her window. She always used to make sandwiches in case we got hungry. We'd go to Mr Moore's sweetshop and buy a packet of Woodbine cigarettes, give them to the porter and he would open the gate. We would get into the Pictures for nothing.

It was lovely growing up in a big family. All my sisters spoilt me. I could go on but we could be here until next year.

# ABBY

## No-one warns you about getting old

I was the youngest of three children and was named after my grandmother. We lived in a four-bedroom place in College Buildings. My mother and father had one room, another belonged to my brother Harold and the other room was for my sister Doris and I. There was an outside toilet and a cold tap downstairs and a tin bath. We would go to Gaulston Street Baths for a wash. There were bathrooms on the roof, where we could have a cold bath in the summer. This is now the Attlee Buildings, Toynbee Hall.

My mother was a cigar-maker, before she met my father, but she suffered with asthma. My father was a street trader at Billingsgate Market and Covent Garden, like his father before him. My father took over from my grandfather aged ten, when grandfather became blind.

I went to school in Commercial Street, which is now Canon Barnett School. I was there until aged twelve. I remember there was coal fired in the classroom in winter. We would have prayers in the morning. If you were Jewish you didn't have to do them, but there was a mixture of children. There was a Turkish girl, Irish Catholic children, so I appreciated other religions. We all played together. I remember the 'nit nurse' or 'Nitty Nora' as we called her. If you had nits you had to go to the clinic in Old Montague Street to get them sorted out. We had to wear aprons in school, as they were not very clean. We learnt how to knit and the clothes were sent to places like Africa. We also had to do washing, ironing and cooking. We would cook meals and take them home. Teachers are different now. In those days boys did woodwork. I still have candlesticks my brother made.

At the age of fourteen I went into dressmaking, which I hated. I attended the Jewish Free School between twelve and fourteen, which was down the lane. I missed six months of school. I then had exams and was hoping attend Raines School, but missed out on a place.

My dad's sister was married to my mother's brother. They lived along the

same landing as us. We had a playground where we lived and we used to play skipping. We would play in the laundry rooms. Toynbee Hall Kitchen overlooked it. They often held parties in Toynbee Hall and we were given food to taste. I had a very happy childhood. My dad used to sell toys. Ours would often disappear. Dad would give our old toys to nuns and give us new ones. We accepted it because we knew other children needed them more than ourselves. Dad would often provide toys for all the children at parties in Toynbee Hall.

Every year we went on holiday to Yarmouth, which was good for Mum's asthma. I was six years old when she passed away. She died of pneumonia. Mum's sister came to look after us just before my brother's barmitzvah and they eventually got married. I got used to my father's second marriage. Being young it didn't make much difference to me, but my sister had a breakdown. We used to visit my grandmother, who lived in Bell Lane when mother was alive, especially during the Jewish holidays, and she would light candles. My aunty didn't do that when she came to live with us.

I was made a pair of reins, so I was taken out at the weekends, mainly to get out of my aunt's way. My brother, sister and I used to walk as far as St Paul's. We used to walk through the City, where the shipping companies were. The sailing ships were very big. We would then walk back home again. That was our Saturday morning walk when the weather was fine. There wasn't much traffic then as there is now.

My brother and brother-in-law went into the army and we drifted apart. Dad died in College Buildings and I ended up in hospital. I decided to leave London and joined the fire service, the first quiet period before the bombings. I then joined the army in York, where I made tea and suppers. This was in 1940, the first year of the War.

The passing-out parade decided what job we'd do. Because I was small I had to measure my stride during the parade. I was posted at York Minster, from the barracks. It was snowing and we felt cold in the barracks. In a crack, through the floor, we could see the boiler. Myself and another girl went down and managed to switch the gas taps on and started the boiler. Other girls from the other barracks soon joined us for a

hot wash. The regular soldiers would not help us. They didn't like women in the barracks.

From York I went to Bradford, where I trained on predictor machines, which were used for crossing points. From Bradford I moved to Wales, near Cardigan Bay, for target practice, and then moved to Newcastle gun post. I had to link cables through open country, and we had to repair the telephone lines. I came out because I had to go to hospital for sinusitis, which made me deaf for three months. I could not get my belongings as someone in my rank had meningitis. So at the beginning of 1941 I had to come out of the army, including the fire service. I was discharged with a pension for ill health. My father died around me the same time.

I went to work in Midhurst as a gardener. I then joined the land army until 1945. I used to grow the vegetables, and gained my independence. There was a pub nearby, and I used to feed the cattle beetroot leaves - until the milk turned red. I also done gardening in New Barnet. It was in a place for unmarried mothers. I shared a room with a cook. It was especially built for the land army. There was a lot of sadness there, especially when the women had to leave their babies for adoption. My aunt died around this time, and I had to return home. I was worried because I would have no place to live. In 1947 I was in charge of a garden in a hostel in Hertfordshire. The place was for prisoners-or-war. I remember getting snowed in for three weeks. It was one of the worst winters ever. We had to use a sledge to get bread etc.

I then went on to work in parks. I returned to College Buildings, and applied for a job at the local labour exchange, as it was then called. I knew the person who interviewed me and I got the job at Victoria Park. My experience in the land army helped me. At first I did manual jobs but then started potting plants. I eventually got a job in the greenhouse and went on to do shows. I was still living on my own in College Buildings. In 1960 I was left some money by an aunt and so I learnt how to drive and saw my sister more often. I also needed a car for work as I was doing nights and had to stoke up the boilers for the greenhouses. I had to leave College Buildings because the building was being knocked down. I moved to College East. In 1962 I got a job in Southwark Park. I had to leave in 1970 to have a double mastectomy. I retired in 1972.

I had no social time. I had no television, but I enjoyed reading. I then started helping out at Toynbee Hall Day Centre, with Friends and Neighbours, where I worked in the office and took parcels around in my mini. I joined Amnesty International and the Pensioners' Action Group (PAG) IN 1976. I was involved in the PAG demonstrations to Parliament on hospital ward closures, pensioners' right and other anti-Thatcherite policies. I didn't like her. She took away free milk for schools.

I campaigned against the closure of hospitals, including Bethnal Green. Ken Livingstone did a lot for people, for example Dame Colet House. I started the disability group there. We got a black taxi. I wrote to the Prince Charles Fund and received £100 toward it. I am also a member of the Labour Party and I've always voted. Now I can no longer go. No-one warns you about getting old.

**N.A**

### **My dad was proud of me**

My mum used to say Monday was washing day. Tuesday was ironing day. There was no electric iron then so we had to put the iron on the gas. Wednesday was cleaning the bedroom day. There was no Hoover, vacuum cleaner, and so my mum would get on her hands and knees with a bucket of water and a cloth. Dad would get told off for opening the windows because mum would say the dust was blowing in. Thursdays would be sweeping the front and backyard, washing the steps and cleaning the toilet, and Friday was shopping day.

My dad was a very patient man. My mother would say that he wasn't interested but dad was. My dad would take us on holidays and would talk to us and let us have fun. My aunty told me that my dad went to university. My grandmother had a lot of children and my grandfather had died. She wouldn't let dad go to university because she wanted him to work and bring money in, but dad was interested and someone spoke to gran about it and in the end she agreed to let him go.

On Saturdays dad would take mum to a club. He used to drive a tram before becoming a bus driver. My mum always used to moan about my dad. Another man would have shouted at her and given her a good wallop. I always wondered why he didn't do that.

My dad was a good dad. He had a car, and as a child I was very excited and proud thinking we have a car. Once going to the seaside, I remember my mum going on about why my dad was driving so fast and saying to my dad 'Mind this, mind that.' I think she was making my dad's nerves bad. Then all of a sudden my dad pulled over and asked my mum to get out of the car. She was asked to move to the back seat and my brother and I moved into the front seat.

My mum had a very strict routine. You weren't allowed to sit on the settee and you had to take your shoes off entering the house. Everything had to be in its place, even the salt and pepper pots. My father once asked her if she preferred that he sit on the floor because he was told off for sitting on

the settee. She answered 'Please yourself.' I always wondered why dad married her - she was awful. I never had fun with my mum, you daren't laugh in the presence of her company.

When I finished school I was chosen to go to grammar school. I was given a letter to take home. The uniform was blue and silver and a hat with an orange ribbon around it. For summer you would wear a straw hat with a purple ribbon around it. My mum wasn't happy. She said I should go to work and asked who was going to pay for the uniform. My dad said to her that he would buy the shoes one week, the blouse the following week until I got the full set. My dad was proud of me and he said to my mum that I was going to grammar school - I was selected and went. I grew up to love my dad and hate my mum. School was very strict in those days.



# ROSE

## **We were allowed asylum in Great Britain - bless you forever!**

I was born in 1920 of immigrant parents, who escaped from the Russian pogroms and were allowed asylum in Great Britain - bless you forever!

We lived in a little house in Barnet Street, adjoining Kinder Street, E1. Kinder, in the Yiddish and German language, means children and there were plenty of them so I was never lonely, even being an only child. My mother was forty years old and my father was fifty-six when I was born, so I was the apple of their eyes. They were wonderful parents and taught me everything that I am today. My father taught me how to sew as he was an excellent tailor and my mother taught me how to knit, crochet and take care of myself.

I learned English at school and I adored acting, singing, writing and reciting poems. I loved my school days and was sad to leave at the age of fourteen, but understood the fact that I had to go to work to support myself and to help my parents, as money was always in demand and father could only earn enough to keep the roof over our heads and to feed and clothe us.

I started at a dress factory, sewing on buttons and bows, but improved and went on to become a machinist earning a magnificent wage of two pounds, ten per week. With this I was able to support my parents and helped them as much as possible.

The factory that I worked in was in Aldgate and we were above the show rooms, so whenever the buyers came to see the dresses they called me down to model them. I had what was known as the perfect stock figure, that is bust 36 inches, waist 26 and hips 38, and whatever I wore it was just right. And so the years rolled by and I became quite a young lady. I worked hard and went to evening classes, after I had finished, to learn more about acting and drama. On the whole life was enjoyable and comfortable until the moment came when World War II was declared. I'll never forget it. I was hanging up a pair of stockings in the wash in our little yard when my neighbour called over and told me the news.

Of course we were all shocked and felt quite numb and it was very hard to comprehend the future. Instantly everything was turned upside down.

The factories started to make uniforms. My factory was making gas mask cases. I was making sandbag containers out of coarse cloth which made sewing very difficult because our sewing machines were very delicate and only took light materials. However we did the best we could. The council started to build brick shelters and also put Anderson shelters in People's gardens. Our whole lives were put on hold, not knowing what was to happen.

At first there was a lull and then the bombings started and we had to arrange our lives around the shelters, work and keeping alive.

I joined a concert party to help people forget their worries. Every evening the rest of the party and I would rehearse our singing and acting and then go to the shelters to perform, come what may. We loved doing this and we were rewarded by the joy it brought to all the people we performed for. I met my future husband at one of the shelters. He was playing his harmonica then and I was thinking how talented he was. When he finished he came over to me, introduced himself, looked at me very seriously and said 'I am going to marry you one day'. I stared at him and realised that it was love at first sight. I was also so taken with him. I was so very happy to think that I had met the man of my dreams and so we became a couple.

I was then assigned to work at a first-aid unit, as a first-aid nurse, not far from where I lived. When I finished my duties and had time off, I used to go to the factory and help them out and also to earn a little more money so that I could help my parents.

We had to move from our little house in Kinder Street, as it got slightly bombed when we were in the shelter, but we found a ground floor flat nearby and settled down once again. The raids continued all the time. We all got used to the sound of the sirens and bombs. It became an every day thing for us. I was at the first-aid post, my husband-to-be worked for the Crown Film Unit, putting together the news and taking part in doing so. We decided to become engaged and so with both sets of parents

being agreeable, my mother and I made a little tea and the two families got to know one another and to care for one another.

Time moved on again. As I looked at my father I saw that he was getting old and he was complaining of chest pains. The doctor gave him some pills and he seemed a little better. Today they would be known as angina, but I don't think they knew much about it then. I decided that my father should give up work. He was still going out and working a full day. I said to him, 'Father, you are going to retire. I will support us,' and so I did. I had a small sewing machine at home, and my father used to pass the time making little aprons when he would feel like doing so.

Once again time marched on. Dennis, my fiancé, and I were talking of marriage. I said that as my father was getting on, I did not want to wait for the War to end before tying the knot. I was afraid my father would die before it happened and I was very sad because the one thing that he wanted above all was to see me married and to give me away. So we decided to marry on Sunday 6th August 1944. The bombing was still very strong but we were very busy making plans and ignored it. My friend lent me her wedding dress. It was beautiful and fitted me just so. I ordered roses for my bouquet. We booked our wedding party in a hotel in Aldgate as it was near for all the guests. I had no immediate family except my few friends, but Dennis had a brother, grandparents and a number of cousins. The great day was approaching. It was Sunday 5th August 1944. My father and I were standing outside our flat to catch the sunshine, as it was a most beautiful day. We were talking when suddenly we heard the dreadful sound. We knew that there was a doodlebug overhead. My father looked at me. I looked at him. He opened his arms and I flew into them and he held me like a child and said in Yiddish, as he had very little English, 'Vos will zein will zein', which means 'Que sera sera!' (What will be will be). We closed our eyes for what seemed like an eternity, not knowing anything else. All of a sudden there was a terrible crash. We opened our eyes. We were alive. The bomb had crashed in the next street only an empty warehouse. Fortunately no one was hurt so we were overjoyed. Game over, thanks to God Almighty, and we continued with our lives once again.

Dennis was at work at the time but his parents and brother, who lived

around the corner, all came to see what had happened and so after a tearful story we all came into my flat and mother made the inevitable cup of tea and all was well again. Sunday 6th August dawned bright and beautiful. I helped mother prepare the table with wine and biscuits. This was for the neighbours who would be coming in to wish me good luck. This was always done at weddings, and was a very nice thing. I dresses myself and got ready to leave with my parents and in-laws to the synagogue, which was in Nelson Street, not far from where we lived in Myrdle Street.

We arrived, The organist could not appear, as he was bombed out. I had one bridesmaid out of two because the other little one was also unable to come. Putting aside all the events, my father walked me up the aisle and gave me away to Dennis. The service was lovely, only interrupted by the occasional bomb, but at last I was married to Dennis. The few cars then took our guests and us to our wedding repast, which we all enjoyed. We had to finish early, as those were the rules that the government had ordered, so by early evening we were all home. Dennis and I spent a small honeymoon at one of the West End hotels and then came back to resume our married lives together. We had a flat near my first-aid post, which was in Old Montague Street.

Time marched on again. The War ended. My father passed away in 1947. My mother was devastated, my father-in-law passed away too so both mothers were widows. My dear brother-in-law was married then to a wonderful girl and between us we managed to look after our mothers. We then had to move house because the local council had bought our flats and so I moved into a lovely maisonette in Jamaica Street, on the fifteenth and sixteenth floors and my mother-in-law moved into a very nice flat across the road.

The view from my maisonette was super. I watched Canary Wharf Tower going up and could see for miles on end. Unfortunately my mother passed away. My mother-in-law was trying her best to carry on, as her health was not good. She was a very brave woman and was always saying to me, 'What can't be cured must be endured', and so she did, and when she passed away, those words of hers were part of myself, I am always quoting them.



*View of Jamaica Street, 1960s*

Time marched on once more. My husband and I decided to visit Italy for our yearly holiday. We decided that Italy was our most favourite place but we could not speak Italian. So we decided to go to evening classes to learn Italian. Our school was in Ben Jonson Road, not far from where we lived, and our teacher was a most charming English lady whom we took to right away. The other students were also very nice and we soon became firm friends and enjoyed our meetings. This went on for quite a few years. Then out of the blue the council decided to close all language classes except the English once for new immigrants to learn how to read and write, and so with deep regret we all had to go. Well, life is always a battle and one has to have the courage to pick oneself up, dust oneself off and start all over again.

By this time Dennis had worked very hard at his photography. He always wanted to be a theatrical photographer and worked for Jack Parnell at the London Palladium and Finsbury Park theatres, producing the great in-house photos. This was wonderful work and I became his assistant and learned how to produce photos from scratch. Then along came television and that caused all the music theatres to close and once again life changed, but Dennis still carried on with his photography. We also started to learn French because he wanted to work as an interpreter for BT. This was exciting work and he really enjoyed it. In the years following he also worked for his cousin in a menswear shop. Then one day I said to

him 'Darling, you have worked very hard. It's time for you to retired.' He looked at me in amazement until it struck him, and then he said 'Do you know you are right, I will do so.' He did and we spent the next two years of our lives, doing whatever we wanted. It was fabulous.

Then one morning as we were getting ready, Dennis called out from the bathroom 'Rose, I have a pain in my chest. It's not too bad, could it be indigestion?' I said perhaps, and gave him some hot water, thinking to ease it but the pain grew steadily worse and so I sent for our doctor, who promptly came and sent Dennis to hospital for tests. The ambulance came within minutes and we were taken to Mile End Hospital. I was told to wait until all the tests had been done. It seemed to last forever. Then a matron came towards me and said in a very faint voice 'Mrs ——— , your husband had a very bad heart attack and has just passed away.' I just could not take in her words. The light of my life was gone and I could then have died with him.

How I got home I could not say. I must have been on autopilot. I then phoned my brother and sister-in-law. They arrived as soon as they could and made the arrangements for the funeral. The days and weeks passed and I just could not accept the fact that Dennis was not longer with me. Without the help of my wonderful in-laws and friends I would have been entirely lost. Gradually, I realised that I would have to go on and so I joined the day centre at Stepney Green. I also started to care for my husband's aunty who had also just lost her son. These activities kept me sane and became my reasons for living. In between, my aunty had a



Rose

wonderful 100th birthday party at the nursing home in which she wanted to spend her time. She lived until 102 and was sorely missed when she died.

I have just enjoyed my birthday. I am 89 years old, born on Guy Fawkes Day. And so, I thank God for giving me the years to be with my lovely friends and to celebrate the fact that I'm still here. So I will say 'ta-ta for now', TTFN as the Cockneys would say. Thank you for having me. God bless all.



## **TOWER HAMLETS FRIENDS & NEIGHBOURS**

THFN is an independent charity which has been running services for older people in the borough of Tower Hamlets since 1947.

We currently support over 250 isolated and vulnerable older people each year. Most of them are over 80, housebound and with long term health problems and limited mobility and lacking regular support from family.

We provide a range of befriending services including home visits, phone support, information provision, support to access services, advocacy, consultation, escorting to appointments, group and one-to-one outings and activities in the home.

Our services aim to alleviate social isolation, loneliness and depression and increase the physical and mental well-being of the people we support. We have a skilled team of paid befriending workers and volunteers who reflect the ethnic diversity of our client group and of the local area.

Tower Hamlets Friends & Neighbours  
St Margaret's House  
21 Old Ford Road  
London E2 9PL

020 8983 7979

[www.thfn.org.uk](http://www.thfn.org.uk)  
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