

Interviewee: Janet Neale

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 06.12.2010

Interviewer: This is an interview with Janet Neale on the 6th of December 2010 and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Janet: January 1935.

Interviewer: So how old were you when the war started then in thirty-nine?

Janet: Coming up to five, I was four, yes.

Interviewer: Whereabouts were you living at this point?

Janet: In this house and the house next door. My father owned both houses.

Interviewer: So you were living with your family? Who was in your family?

Janet: Pardon?

Interviewer: Who was in your family? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Janet: Oh, my — I had a brother, well, I have a brother. My grandmother was living with us because she had to get out of Guernsey cos of the Germans so she lived with us as well.

Interviewer: So when did your grandmother leave Guernsey then?

Janet: 19 — 38 or 39.

Interviewer: What were your parents doing?

Janet: Oh, my mother made cakes, celebration cakes, put them in our prams and walked around the big houses in Bexley and sold the cakes and my father opened a little shop in a big wooden hut at the back of this house.

Interviewer: What did he sell?

Janet: Everything. Vegetables, everything — yeah. Everything.

Interviewer: Were you in school when the war started? Or were you still at home?

Janet: Well, I was at school because I went to a little private school down the road. So I was at school, yes — at that time.

Interviewer: Can you remember the day that war broke out on the 3rd of September 1939?

Janet: Oh, yeah. Yes, yes. Yes, I can because I had a condition called Acidosis and I could have the fruit — the only fruit I could eat was bananas and my father obviously didn't sell bananas because they went on. So I went down to the greengrocers down the road and thought, you know four years old, 'Oh, I'm going to go home a different way' and I came home a different way and the air raid sirens went and my mother and father went absolutely mad trying to find me and you know what children are like, 'Oh, I was alright', you know. I remember it as clear as everything. Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel when you heard the news? Did you know what was going to happen.

Janet: No, no. Not really, no.

Interviewer: Was there ever any talk of you being evacuated?

Janet: No, my parents said if I'm going to be killed, I'd be killed with them. They would not have me evacuated.

Interviewer: So did you stay in this house —

Janet: No, I was in the other.

Interviewer: In the other house throughout the war?

Janet: Yes, yeah.

Interviewer: Ok, did you go to school?

Janet: Yes. Yes, cos I started proper school then and my father, because he had his own business, he used to deliver things and he had a big delivery bike with the big basket on it and first — when it first started he used to go to school and pick my brother and I up, sit us in the basket and bring us home but of course you got used to it after a while. You stayed at school.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: So were there a lot of other children in your area that had been evacuated?

Janet: No, I can't think of anybody who had been evacuated — no. My father was in the — he was in the First World War. He was too old to go in to the Second World War and — so he was a Home Guard and an ARP and when the air raid siren went, you know, at night, he used to knock on the neighbours door whose husbands were in the army, you know, abroad in Africa and that. He looked after all the neighbours made sure they were all alright with their children. But —

Interviewer: Did he ever talk to you about his experience in the First World War?

Janet: No, no. Well, the only thing I know and of course people in the First World War didn't speak about it but I know that he was a dispatch rider. A motorbike dispatch rider but, no, he never spoke

about it. He had medals and everything which he gave to my son and¹ I presume his son's got them now. But, no, he never spoke about it.

Interviewer: So what year did he join the ARP? When the war broke out?

Janet: 1939.

Interviewer: Ok.

Janet: And the Home Guard.

Interviewer: What was his — his duties in the Home Guard?

Janet: Oh, I have no idea. No, I don't know. He used to go to Shooters Hill and practice — yeah.

Interviewer: Did your mother do any war work?

Janet: No, I don't —. No, I don't think so. My mother-in-law did, she was an ambulance driver and she was in the other Fire of London driving ambulances. She was completely wet for three or four days and then she developed tuberculosis and she died when my husband was fourteen. Of tuberculosis.

Interviewer: What year was that? During the war?

Janet: My husband was born in thirty-two so that's forty-two. I can't work it out now — '46, yes.

Interviewer: '46.

Janet: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you have a lot of air raids around this area?

Janet: Oh! Because they used to have the big anti-aircraft guns in Danson Park and they drained Danson Park Lake for that. Oh, it was horrendous. Horrendous around here. The noise — you know, because of the, oh, the anti-aircraft guns, all the houses across the road were all flattened and — oh, yes, it was very bad around here. And then when the V — V1's started we — the house next door we had that was practically demolished. And we had an outside — before that happened — when the war first started — we had an outside air raid shelter and — but it kept on getting flooded. So my father got an indoor air raid shelter and that used to be there in the front room and he got that. The night of the V1's my mother counted sixty stopped over the house and the sixty-first hit us. My grandmother was up in Manchester with another of her daughters, she came back here and that's when the V2's started.

Interviewer: So when you said the sixty-first one hit you did it damage your house?

¹ 5 min

Janet: Yes. The house next door — yeah. Not completely, it was only one room we could live in that was all and that was where the indoor shelter was.

Interviewer: Was anyone injured?

Janet: Yes, I was. Mainly because I was a bit of a rebel and I was excited by all this, got out from the indoor shelter, hit my toe on the indoor shelter and then I developed tuberculosis in the bones of my foot through that injury. That was all really.

Interviewer: Did you go in to hospital after the incident?

Janet: No, no. My mother took me and they said it was a [unclear] fracture, what it called then, and, you know, bound it up. When I was fourteen/fifteen it got a lot worse and eventually I had an operation. It was an orthopaedic surgeon and I was nineteen.

Interviewer: How did you feel with all of this going on around you?

Janet: As a child it is difficult to — it's a bit — in some ways it's exciting other ways you accept. Children accept things. The only thing is my brother is two and a half years older than me and we were coming home from school and we were attacked from an airplane and it was just sort of down the road and my brother threw me against a brick wall to protect me but I found that quite exciting. I used to like to go and get the — what do you call it — I can't think of the word. You know, bits of metal, there is a special word.

Interviewer: Shrapnel?

Janet: Shrapnel². You used to collect those. Who could get the biggest bit? I mean, it's a child isn't it? You — it didn't really — I mean my mother and father were with me. I had a comparatively normal life. It was life. That was what I was used to. Children don't — children accept what goes on I think — yes.

Interviewer: So you said that you had an Anderson shelter in the garden to begin with.

Janet: It was in this garden. The — the shelter was in this garden but when my father got the indoor shelter it was in the other house.

Interviewer: So when did you stop using the shelter in the garden?

Janet: 1942? Something like that. Yeah.

Interviewer: You said it filled up with water?

Janet: Oh, yes. Yes. Every time, not every time but when we got out of the bunks, you know, we stepped in to water. My father said, 'We're not having this anymore'. Bad enough, you know, that there was a war but living like that as well so we got the indoor shelter. We all slept in it, all five of us.

² 10 min

Interviewer: Did that make you feel safe? The indoor shelter?

Janet: Oh, I think it was all a bit of adventure, really. Yes, I suppose, it did, yes, because, yeah, otherwise, yeah. Yes, from that point of view I don't know, you know, it was — it was a norm. That's where you went to bed. So as I say a child doesn't — doesn't question. I don't think they do. I say I was only, what was I? Just over nine when the — getting up to ten when the war finished. I think, perhaps, it affected my brother a bit more because he was a bit older, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you and your brother talk about the war?

Janet: What? Since the war?

Interviewer: Yes.

Janet: No, no. For — no, not really. Not really. I do to the grandchildren cos you know at school they had these things and I talked to them about that but I don't know. I don't really.

Interviewer: You said your father kept a shop. Did he have the shop throughout the war?

Janet: Yes.

Interviewer: Did he sell food in the shop as well?

Janet: Yes, so you had to have coupons and — and coupons for your food and for your sweets, if you were lucky to get any sweets.

Interviewer: Did you have people queuing up to go to the shop?

Janet: No, no. What we used to do, cos, you know, life was different then, even though I was perhaps only six or seven on a Saturday morning I used to take the takings up to Barclays bank in Blackfen for my father and you wouldn't consider doing that now. I used to do, mind you it's probably only a few pounds and then I was responsible for sorting out all the coupons and there was a Food Ministry down towards Old Bexley. I used to take all the coupons down there once a month to the ministry. But it was — you had to — you helped your parents, you know, they were working and they didn't have time to do it so I used to do it.

Interviewer: How did you find that? Was it a difficult duty?

Janet: No, I didn't give it a thought. You know, dad asked me to do it so I did it. But as I said, when you think now that I used to go up the bank at that age [laughs]. I used to go on the bus. It's an entirely different — my parents, both of them, you know, when the war had started my mother had stopped going around with the pram and — cos she couldn't get the ingredients for the cakes and they both worked in the shop. The shop was here because this — this — there was a wall there and so the shop was in the front here and yeah. First we had the big shed in the back and then he moved in to this house. Yeah, when he bought the other house, he — they must have bought the other house

— I remember the people moved out cos they were³ frightened and I know my father got it for a good price and that's when he moved the shop from the shed at the back in to this house.

Interviewer: So was this when the war had started?

Janet: Yes, yes. I don't know what date. It was probably around 1940-41.

Interviewer: What was your experience of rationing? Did you have to ever go hungry?

Janet: No, no. Not really from the point of view that my father had a shop and I'm not saying — but you know. No, I didn't no. But when — towards the end of the war, you know, they had sort of whale meat and that sort of thing which I wouldn't touch. I wouldn't touch anything — I am practically a vegetarian now and I think that's when it started off, 'I'm not eating any of that'. But my mother used to make pies with everything in it.

Interviewer: So how did it work for your family as you owned a shop, did you have to — were you able to take any on the side. Without the rationing?

Janet: No. No. The only advantage you had that if things were short. You know, perhaps a jelly or something. When they came in, perhaps you — I don't remember how many and perhaps you had six jellies at the time so we were lucky. We had jelly, you know, but —. But, of course, we had to hand our coupons in for it. Cos my father had to register all the food and that. But, yeah, that was the advantage. Perhaps, we were the first to have something. But, no, I can't — I never went home hungry. Life was very difficult and it was very, very cold and my grandmother said she'd knit me some stockings to go to school. So she knitted me these long stockings to keep me warm. The first time they were washed they went in to red and green stripes because of the water [laughs], but I still had to wear them. But, yeah, I remember that. And I remember also just after the war, and I don't know what, the first time I'd seen ice cream. I remember that.

Interviewer: How did the war — how did your life change after the war?

Janet: Well, I don't think it did really. I don't know. Well, in 1949 I had an opportunity to go to school in France and learn French and so I took that opportunity up and I went out there, cos I said about my grandmother came from Guernsey, she was French and so I had an opportunity to go out there but really that's all. I got married very young. I was married at eighteen so that's when life changed really. I didn't — I wouldn't say it changed a lot straight after the war, no. The only thing — I changed schools when I was twelve, yes, about twelve, I went to the next school along back from where I lived cos up to then I'd gone to private school in Blackfen Road but he retired and I moved on to the school that my brother was at and when he was older he went on to Pitman's College in Catford. But — no, I can't say that it really changed, no, except that I had a bike. My father could afford to buy me a bike just after the war which was quite a thing because not many people did.

³ 15 min

Interviewer: Did your grandmother go back to —?

Janet: No, no. She stayed with my parents until she died. But her youngest daughter, she was one of the last people on the last boat that left Guernsey and then the other sisters were in Guernsey while — through the war.

Interviewer: So was this your maternal or paternal?

Janet: My — my, no, my mother's family.

Interviewer: Was your mother born in Guernsey?

Janet: Yes, yes. She left when she was about fifteen to come over here to work. She was a children's nanny.⁴

Interviewer: What was your experience of the blackout?

Janet: Well, it was just —. My father, because he was, you know, an ARP, he used to go up and down the road and if there was a crack of light he used to knock on the door so, you know, it was, God help us if there was a crack of light in our — because you're supposed to, you know, show people what you're supposed to do — yeah. But the thing is, in those days, you visited — the families were very close and we visited family and we'd go on the bus and when we came back on the bus, you know particularly in the winter, it was dark. No lights on the bus and no lights in the street. Nothing and you sort of had to guess where you were and that was a big problem. Walking along — cos you don't realise how dark it is when there is nothing at all. I remember, you know, my father saying, 'Where are we now? We have to get off the bus now!', and also if you went on a train they used to say where you — what station you were on otherwise you wouldn't. You didn't know where you were so at least give out what station. But there was just no lights. Nothing. But again you just accepted it. You didn't really know any different.

Interviewer: So what did you have to do to blackout your house? Did you have to help your mum with it?

Janet: No, I think my grandmother and mother did it. You had sort of a — blackout material. Have other people told you about blackout material?

Interviewer: A bit.

Janet: We had blackout material which you, you know, pulled down at night and then drew your curtains. But, yeah, you had to be careful, you couldn't go upstairs and put a light on unless all the blackout was done. That was quite — I don't know, I presume, I don't know whether it was issued to you or if you had to go and buy the blackout material. But I know, I know buying the clothes, with the clothing coupons, was difficult and there was a shop in Bexleyheath. It was called Haines, Haines

⁴ 20 min

(??), and my mother went up there with me and bought me two dresses for the summer and, of course, cos my gate opens on to a park and, of course, in the park they had swings, I went on the swing got caught and one of my dresses was ripped from neck to hem and it was a new dress. 'I've just spent all those coupons!'. Lots of things like that. It was difficult for, you know, children grew all the time. You really never had enough coupons. You used to barter coupons, somebody said, you know, 'Give me this and I'll give you that' and so, yeah. If you — you didn't have, for an instance an older person who didn't want the sweet coupons so, you know, they used to them to you vice versa and so you would, 'I'll give you sweet coupons, you give me clothing coupons', 'I'll give you food and —', and of course the, I suspect you know, the children had a blue ration book and the adults had a buff ration book

Interviewer: You mentioned that the house that you lived in that that was damaged.

Janet: Oh, badly damaged.

Interviewer: When was the house repaired?

Janet: About 1940? It happened in about 1944-45, I don't think it was all that long probably about a year eighteen months.

Interviewer: Who was it that came to repair it? Was it your family that repaired it or was it —?

Janet: No, no. It was damage repair. Yeah, damage repair. But I remember when this V1 hit the house, my mother had, next door had a fantastic garden full of roses and she picked all the roses the night before and had them in vases all over the place and she, I suppose it was shock, she got out of the shelter and she was going, 'Oh, my roses, my roses!' All the vases were broken, all her roses were all over the floor. I remember that as clear as anything, her saying, 'My roses, my roses!'.⁵ But, no, then they did send me, with my grandmother up to, just outside Manchester, cos I was ill and because we were only living in one room. I went up there with my mother's sister. I was up there for about three months. But I wasn't really evacuated because it was with family.

Interviewer: How was that?

Janet: Well, I enjoyed it really because they had all these cobbles on the street and if you — if you wore clogs with the steel bottoms if you went along and kicked them sparks came out. I loved doing that. My mum thought it was terrible. 'Oh, you can't do things like that', cos she was quite particular. 'You can't', 'Oh, yes it's lovely' I said. But I was only up there no more than three months, then my grandmother and I came back.

Interviewer: Did you go to school while you were up there?

⁵ 25 min

Janet: Yes, I did. Yes, I can't remember what school. Yes, I did go up there to school for that short time.

Interviewer: How did the locals treat you? The local children?

Janet: They didn't always understand the way I spoke cos they thought I was a cockney and then — oh, I had no problem really. No, I didn't have any problems. They were ok with me — yeah. That was a — actually it wasn't Manchester it was Stockport, a place called Marple. Marple. But that was all. I did go to school for a little while. I was not up there for more than three months. I got better and I came back but the thought perhaps it was like the strain and everything of the war because as you said just now, I was, at times, I was very frightened. I remember my mother saying — because some of our family was sent to Belsen (??) and my mother was saying if the Germans invaded she would kill my brother and I. She wouldn't — she wouldn't let us live through it. I remember that as clear as anything.

Interviewer: Why do you think she told you that?

Janet: Well, because she knew how the family had suffered — well, she guessed how they suffered in Guernsey and Jersey and Belsen (??). She didn't want that, she rather we were dead than live a life like that. Because I had, one of the family complained to the Germans about the treatment of the prisoners and the German was very polite and he said, 'Don't worry', because she could see it through her window, he said, 'Don't worry you will never see any ill-treatment from your windows again.', she said, 'Thank you very much' and the next day they came and boarded every window up in the house and it was like that until the end of the war. You didn't have a lot of communication, obviously, but, you know, you knew what was going on. My mother said, no, she didn't want —. That's the only thing I remember from that point of view. But again you accepted it. That was the way life was period. But I know — we had a lot of firebombs here. They — they say that, perhaps, that's one of the problems I've got because my father used to say, 'Come on, come and see all the fences are alright' and because he was a Londoner we often used to go up the next morning — the next say and see the damage that had been done. Perhaps it was the fire, you know, the ashes and everything. They don't know but it might have gone in to my lungs. But, you know, nothing is confirmed. That was all there.

Interviewer: So your father used to take you to look at the damage?

Janet: Yes, to see what was happening because he wanted us what was happening and how evil war was, having lived through the First World War. Well, of course, other people — my, you know, children my age, a lot of their mothers were younger than my mother and father because they got married late in life. So they weren't aware, the Second World War was the first war they had been in but my parents had been through⁶ the First World War.

⁶ 30 min

Interviewer: Had your mother done any war work in the First World War or?

Janet: No, cos she was born in 1899 so she was only fifteen when the war started and then when she was sixteen she came over to England and there she was a children's nanny which she did for many, many years. That was — no, she didn't actually — not as far as I know, no. As I said, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law travelled all around the country building airfields. Maintaining them was what he did in the war so that's why he wasn't called up, cos he was in what they called — that sort of profession that to do that.

Interviewer: Did you think that the education that you were given that that was adequate?

Janet: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It was more than adequate. Oh, yes. Unless, you know, I was fortunate because my parents were well — my father was born in Camberwell but they were very knowledgeable people. They opened their minds to everything so, you know, I was always, I always had a varied life and, yes, my education was fine. I worked until I was seventy-three anyway. So, yeah, I have always worked. No, I had no problems — no problems at all. I think because perhaps they didn't — they didn't like the council schools, as they were then, that I did — they managed to put me in to a, my brother and I, in to a private school for a few years. Perhaps that helped us as well. I don't know. We did well, both of us really.

Interviewer: How would you summarise your experience of the war?

Janet: Horrifying, really. Yeah. I wouldn't wish, I know there's a lot of wars going on right now, but I wouldn't wish anybody to go through it and yet strangely enough all the family is involved with the army. It's strange really. I never been but my daughter is and my grandson and my youngest granddaughter and my husband was. It's really strange and my son was in the army. He was invalided out of the army but it's strange really that life has gone like that. I think war is horrifying, yeah. I wouldn't put this on tape but the houses across the road they were — they were, you know, absolutely demolished and there were children in them. It was horrifying. I remember that as clear as anything.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of casualties around this area?

Janet: Yeah, a lot. Yes, a lot of casualties. They weren't — I say those houses there they were rebuilt — they were completely demolished, three over there and — but the other houses, like those houses, got bomb damaged but weren't completely demolished but, yeah, a lot of casualties around here.

Interviewer: Do you know if you parents ever thought about leaving London?

Janet: Oh, no, they wouldn't have done. No, no. I don't think it ever occurred to them. It was their home. I mean my father used to cycle down from Peckham/Camberwell on Sundays when he was young, he used to go to, what they called, the Woodman at Blackfen. Then he married my mother in 19 — in 1930 and these houses were built then and he said, 'That's where we're going to live' and

that's what they wanted to do so they came here and made life here. No, I don't think they ever thought about —.

Interviewer: Do you think that what you experienced in the war, that that changed you as a person at all?

Janet: Oh, I think any experience⁷ changes you. I think perhaps it made me a stronger person. I am quite a strong person, not that it matters on this tape. I have had quite a lot of problems. I think it made me a stronger person. I think I brought my children up the same way and my daughter brought her children up the same way. Yes, I think it does and it carries on generation after generation. I think that, yes, I do. Life is very strange isn't it — mapped out for you.

Interviewer: Ok, I don't have any more questions now is there something that you would want to add that you feel like you haven't had the chance to talk about?

Janet: No, I don't think so. No, no. I probably carried on a bit but —.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

End of Interview.

⁷ 35 min