

**Interviewee: Jean Smith**

**Interviewer: Malin Lundin**

**Date: 02.11.2010**

Interviewer: This is an interview with Jean Smith on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2010 and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. Would you be able to tell me, first of all, your date of birth?

Jean: Yes, December 1931.

Interviewer: Ok, so how old were you when the war broke out?

Jean: I was eight in the September and then nine in the December. When the war broke out, I do remember being told about it. And what I was expecting — I went to look out the window when I was told because I was expecting to see German soldiers marching down the road. But obviously that didn't happen, thank goodness. When the Blitz started we were living in South London and our house unfortunately was near a small factory and I think they were aiming for the factory but they hit our house which was sort of sliced in two but we were in an Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden, fortunately, so, you know, we were all ok. So after that, my mother had a sister who lived in Plymouth, so we went to Plymouth and soon after that, of course, they blitzed Plymouth as well so we had to leave there as well. We went to a little town in Totnes, in Devon called Totnes, which is fairly well known. We had to — we lived in 3 or 4 different places, we were moved around and ended up in a little cottage there which was lovely. I think after that we — the bombing had stopped in London, so we came back to London and then sometime after that the bombing recommenced again. So what happened, my mother sent me back to Totnes, to live with the people who had been our next door neighbours, and she went with my baby sister up to Halifax in Yorkshire. Unfortunately, I was homesick [coughs] and I think I was there for about three months and then — I don't know how they arranged it, when I think these days about the communication then — Because I had an aunt who lived in New Abbott and it was arranged I would go with her and spend one night with her. Then I would go from New Abbott to Crew, I was ten years old at that time — Go to Crew and meet my father who was coming home on leave from the army. Then we were going up to Halifax, to my mother's. It was all arranged by letter. It is absolutely amazing the way it worked out and friends have said to me, these days, you know, you wouldn't send a ten year old on a journey like that now, on their own. But I can remember the train being packed with soldiers and because they were all giving me chocolate [laughs], which was lovely. So we stayed in Halifax, because I went to school up there and some — Actually, I hated Halifax. Everything looked grey because Devon is very green with hedges and Halifax, Yorkshire, is all stone walls and I didn't like that because I couldn't understand the Yorkshire accent either. That was another problem at school but anyway. We came back to London and that was — we stayed in London after that. My mother was given a requisition flat, in Clapham, South London, and we stayed there until the end of the war but because the bombing did continue but we did stay there. Actually the end of our road was completely flattened by a landmine and our flat had all the windows blown out but you know we stayed there. My mother stayed there until she died

afterwards, you know, at the age of 74. But my experience, really, of the war was more like travelling about and going to all different schools and things like that [laughs].

Interviewer: How did you feel about that, going to so many schools?

Jean: It didn't seem to bother me too much. The only one I didn't like was the one in Halifax but I made<sup>1</sup>, in Totnes, I made some good friends there and, you know, people, really, country people are very friendly so I got on alright there and it's amazing really I said, 'that I can read and write' [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you think that the education that you were given, in all these different schools, that that provided or that the education, was adequate?

Jean: Well, in some ways I think it was but I can remember when I was sixteen, they didn't have a maths teacher because of the war, they had all gone to the war, so we did biology instead. So as a result of that, I am afraid, my maths is very, very poor [laughs]. But I can cut up a daffodil bulb and dissect it [laughs]. Otherwise, I seem to cope alright. I suppose I went to schools quickly and maybe I picked things up fairly well, I hope so anyway.

Interviewer: How did the local children in the schools, did they treat you well or were they —?

Jean: Yes, I don't remember being bullied or anything like that. I think, you see, during the war and just after the war there was a sort of comradeship and everyone was friendly and did what they could to help each other. Really, it's a shame that it hasn't lasted. Not like that now, is it?

Interviewer: Did your father serve throughout the war?

Jean: Yes, yes. He came back, fortunately.

Interviewer: What did he do? In which service was he —?

Jean: He served in the Royal Gloucester Regiment and went in, I think, as a military policeman and then — I don't think he enjoyed it. He wasn't that kind of man, he was a very gentle — he was big but he was very gentle and I think he ended up as a cook because he had been a cook pre-war, so they put him in the cook house. But he went over to — I think he went over on the D-day landings and fortunately, he survived that as well. So he was very lucky.

Interviewer: Did he ever tell you about his experience in the war?

Jean: No, he never spoke about it, no. Funnily enough, my husband hasn't spoken an awful lot about his either during the war. I don't know — I, really, I don't know why. Perhaps he wanted to forget.

Interviewer: Which service was your husband in?

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<sup>1</sup> 5 min

Jean: He was in the Navy. He served with the motor torpedo boats and spent most of — most of his time around the Mediterranean. You know — They were quite different things, you know, in the family going all round.

Interviewer: How did you feel about your father going off and serving in the war?

Jean: Oh, I missed him [laughs]. My father and I were very close and it was lovely when he came home on leave, you know, I used to enjoy that.

Interviewer: How often did he use to come back?

Jean: Not a lot. When he came back to Halifax, I think he was gone for quite a long time after that. Can't remember exactly the time and then because obviously he stayed in until the end of the war when he was demobbed.

Interviewer: Returning to your experience as an evacuee. Were you ever part of an official evacuation scheme or was it a private?

Jean: No, no. It was just privately, yes.

Interviewer: Do you know if other children in your area, where you were living at first, if they were evacuated in the beginning of the war.

Jean: Well, I never got to know anyone personally. No, I didn't — Because I think they were sent sort of on mass, you know, and probably more or less stayed in the same place or places where they were put, say villages or whatever. You know — But, no, I didn't. I don't think I would like — oh, well — would like that.<sup>2</sup> This I went to people that I knew, I was lucky in a way.

Interviewer: Do you know why your parents didn't send you off?

Jean: No. Well, I suppose because we left as a family after the Blitz — during the Blitz and then got to know the people in Totnes and they offered to have me and probably that's why I went back there again, you see. I don't how my mother came to go to — she must have been evacuated to, you know, like that because we didn't know anyone in Halifax so she must have been sent there.

Interviewer: How old was your younger sister? Was she a baby or?

Jean: Oh, she was. She was born in thirty-nine, yes, in November so she was, you know, she was a baby all through the war really.

Interviewer: Do you have any other brothers and sisters?

Jean: No, there was just the two of us.

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<sup>2</sup> 10 min

Interviewer: Can you remember when your house was bombed out?

Jean: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about that?

Jean: Well, it was quite a large house. It had the basement and three floors above it, because we lived with my grandparents, well grandfather. My grandmother had died. It was when they were bombing London with incendiary bombs and I think that was — that was when it went but we must have managed to salvage quite a bit of personal things. But then it was so dangerous it was demolished after that and I do know, because of the internet, my son looked it up, that it must have taken the house next door as well because they were very large houses and they now put a block of flats there. I wanted to go back and see but I never have and I have always been told it isn't wise to go back and have a look. So I'm glad I didn't, because I remember it was it was, you know. It had quite a large garden and that is why I think we were safe in the Anderson, because we were at the bottom of the garden.

Interviewer: Do you know if your parents received any money from the government or any help from the government to move into a new house?

Jean: Yes, I think they did. Yes, with the furniture and things like that. Yes, they did use to and also — I don't — my mother did have help with buying school uniforms for us because she couldn't afford them. They were quite good the government, I think the things like — because when she was given this requisition flat in Clapham, the rent was very, very low. You paid a low rent. Which, of course, the landlords didn't like but that was the way they were helped. So it was quite useful really.

Interviewer: Do you remember what you used to do as a child during the war, how you used to entertain yourself?

Jean: Well, I think I used to read a lot, mainly, because, obviously, there was no television or anything like that. We used to sort of read and play games most of the time but I always was a great reader. I used to love reading, I read all the Enid Blyton books and everything. Anything I could lay my hands on I would read.

Interviewer: When you came back to London, you moved into — you moved to Clapham. Were there a lot of air raids still on?

Jean: Oh, yes. Yes, there were. Because, as I said, at the bottom of the road they dropped a landmine and they were big houses and I came home from school one day and they'd been absolutely flattened. There had been an air raid during the day and then we also had two street — oh, they were brick built ones that you could go — Shelters. Shelters. One at each end of the road<sup>3</sup>. I know we went in there one night and then there was a terrific bang in the night and when we got out

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<sup>3</sup> 15 min

the other one had been had a direct hit. That had gone so I think most of the people in there were killed. And then cos obviously, you know, while we were at school there were — the sirens would go and we always used to have to move out [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you have a shelter at the school then?

Jean: No, we didn't have a shelter. We had just used to have to go down or outside, you know, really away like for safety so. Cos this — what my mother had was a maisonette and which was above the other one and the two ladies lived underneath us and they had a Morrison shelter, have you heard of those? Yes. And sometimes we would go down there and we'd all crowd in under this Morrison shelter [laughs].

Interviewer: But you didn't have one in your —?

Jean. No, no. No, we didn't have a shelter at all, it was only a very small garden so, really, the street shelter was, really, meant for us. I can remember, just a few times, we used to go up to Clapham South Underground Station and we slept on the platform. When the bombing — if the bombing was getting bad, we used to go up there. That wasn't very pleasant.

Interviewer: What kind of atmosphere was it in the Underground Station?

Jean: Quite friendly, very friendly. Yes, I mean it was — people used to pack in and made the best of it, you know. Do what they could.

Interviewer: How long would it take you to go to the communal shelter? Was it quite nearby or?

Jean: Oh, the brick one was just across —. Yeah, just outside the house that one was. I suppose they built the two to accommodate the whole street, you see. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember the end of the war? Can you remember when —?

Jean: Oh, victory? Funnily enough I do not remember a terrific amount about that. I'm sure I went — I went up to London, I'm sure of that, with a friend, you know, and joined in the celebrations.

Interviewer: You must have been — fourteen?

Jean: Oh, yes. I was — thirty-eight — what's that? Yes, about fourteen. Yes, because I had two more years in school then, before, you know, I left and went to work.

Interviewer: Can you remember, did you have any street parties or anything like that?

Jean: Oh, yes! Oh, yes. Definitely, that was lovely. It was right in the middle of the road. All the tables and then everybody brought out what food they could and all mixed in together. The children all had paper hats. Yes, that was — and the atmosphere there was absolutely terrific. It really was. It was really something.

Interviewer: Can you remember how you felt when you heard that the war was over?

Jean: Oh, relieved. Very relieved, I, you know, obviously my first thought was, you know, 'Dad will be home soon'. And, you know, uncles that I had in the army and one thing and the other. So, you know, it was a lovely feeling that it was all over. It seems really strange, cos I can remember saying to my mother once, because, obviously, all the news was about the war and I said to my mother, 'Now when the war is over, what's the news going to be about?'. I couldn't imagine anything else, because I couldn't remember anything else before the war, you know, when they used to give the news on the radio and that. I said, 'They're not going to have anything to talk about' [laughs]. That was one of my reactions, anyway. I know, it's a bit odd but — [laughs].

Interviewer: Do you remember if your life changed a lot when the war had ended?

Jean: No, I don't think so. Because I had been going to the same school, by then for two or three years, which was the longest stretch I had been to any school. I'd settled there and had made quite a few friends and it was more or less normal then<sup>4</sup>, you know. When I was sixteen, cos — actually the headmaster found me a job and I went to work like any other teenager then. So — [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you feel like the war changed you as a person? That what you experienced during the war, moving around so much —

Jean: Well, in some ways it has. Some things don't wear off. It's like always being very careful not to waste things cos, you know, people, you know —. A lot of people at my age feel the same because we were brought up to be careful not to waste food, to look after things and things like that and I don't think you ever lose that. You may not realise it but it's subconscious. Not to be wasteful. I mean, which is, I suppose, like the bins and things we got now, you know, and to save things. I mean, things like clothes in — you just hang on to them all the time they're strung together you wear them [laughs]. That is one of the effects, I think, from the war. But I mean, I never remember feeling hungry in the war though the food was rationed and a lot of it was scarce. I don't think I ever went hungry. I know some people say they did but I don't remember. I'm sure I didn't. But I think, you see, we used to be fuelled up with, you know, potatoes and things that are really filling. Bread and that. They say it was one of the healthiest diets you could have, the wartime, especially the wartime bread, which wasn't black. I was reading the paper some time ago, somebody said, 'I remember the bread and it was black in the war'. But it wasn't, it might have been off-white because it wasn't bleached. But there again, that is probably better for us to eat than all the additives that goes in it now.

Interviewer: Do you remember what your mother used to cook?

Jean: Yes, stews, you know, with lots of vegetables in [laughs]. And if she had enough fat and stuff she might make a cake and we used to do cookery at school and we used to have to take our own ingredients but a lot of it were things like carrots to grate and it put in the carrot cake to fill it out. Christmas puddings had all filled with grated carrots and things like that. But it used to turn out alright. We used to enjoy — but then again I didn't remember anything much else apart from what we were

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<sup>4</sup> 20 min

eating at the time so I was quite happy with it all. The only thing I did miss was sweets [laughs]. But even then it was funny because I used to go to a little sweet shop with my coupons that I put on the top of the counter. He used to have glass jars of sweets and if you bought two ounces of sweets with the coupon, you could have two ounces from one of those glass jars without a coupon [laughs]. It was almost like the black market [laughs]. Apart from that I don't think we suffered, really, food wise. I don't remember.

Interviewer: Did you grow any of your own vegetables?

Jean: No, we didn't have a big enough garden for that. No, it was, really, very, very tiny and very stony. You couldn't grow anything.

Interviewer: Do you remember if there were any difference in what you were given to eat depending to where you were living in the country. Did that change from when you were living down in London or Halifax?

Jean: Probably, when I was in Devon, because I had a big garden there and they used to grow there on vegetables, so, I mean, I can't remember the individual dishes we had but I can remember eating quite well there and they probably got extra things like chickens and that, you know, from the farmers. Farmers around had their own veg. — food and vegetables to go with it so they didn't — we didn't really go short<sup>5</sup> either in the country. I mean, if anything came in the shops locally in London, I mean, there was always a big queue and the first time bananas arrived [laughs] — A lot of children didn't know what to do with them and tried to eat the skin as well [laughs].

Interviewer: Was London quite similar to Halifax? In the way of food?

Jean: Well, I didn't shop in Halifax. My mother used to do that more because I was at school, you know, there. But I imagine it was much the same, yeah.

Interviewer: How long was it that you stayed in Halifax for?

Jean: Several months, quite a time because, I mean, I did go to school there. I was coming up to eleven and the headmistress sent for my mother and she said, cos my mother was going back to London then and I think she told the school, and the headmistress sent for her and she said, 'But look, we're just coming up to the exams' — that we took at eleven — scholarship — and she said, 'Really she should stay and take it here'. I was absolutely heartbroken. I said to my mother, 'Whatever you do don't you go back to London and leave me here, please!'. But she didn't, she took me with her. And needless to say, I didn't pass the exam but I was quite happy, I mean, I went to what they called a 'Central School' then. That was half way between like a Secondary and a Grammar, between the two. I got on very well there. I quite liked it. They taught me like shorthand and typing and that's how I went out as a typist.

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Interviewer: Was it different coming back to London after having been away for a while? Had it changed a lot?

Jean: Oh, yes! Yes, cos the bombings had changed such a lot of it and cos it was pre-fabs everywhere. They used to, you know, put pre-fabs where the bombsites had been. I mean, they were marvellous little buildings. They were only suppose to last for, I think, ten years but some of them went on for about thirty or forty years. They were so well built but then again you see, we lived in a different part of Clapham to where we lived before so but there was — it definitely was a difference because of the bombing. It made quite a big difference.

Interviewer: Were you ever scared returning to London?

Jean: The only — yes — the only thing that really scared me were the V2's when they came over because you couldn't hear them or the V1 rockets as well, because when the engines cut out you knew that they were coming down but you never knew where and, really, that was the only thing that used to really frighten me. You used to, you know, wait for it. The actual bombing, I don't think I was scared for that for some reason. It didn't seem to worry me but they did. I didn't used to like them at all. I think they used to give me nightmares.

Interviewer: Have you talked about your experience during the war a lot afterwards?

Jean: What? To the family? Well in bits and pieces not as much as I have today. I didn't know if they were interested or not, you know, they — I mean, I have — they do know that I travelled about and went to quite a lot of schools but I never got into it in any detail with them. I suppose it might be like the men, I don't know why it just never cropped up. When I was younger, I mean, I was busy brining up the family and I didn't use to think about it then, anyway. I think that when they're really younger they're not interested. It's like my granddaughter now, thirteen, she's doing a project on the First World War so, of course, she's beginning to get interested in things and I've told her little bits and pieces<sup>6</sup> about it, you know, and she was quite interested.

Interviewer: Have you ever returned to the places that you were evacuated to afterwards?

Jean: Yes, I have and I was very sorry. We went on holiday to Devon and we were on a coach and it stopped in Totnes and I said to my husband, 'Oh', I said, 'Can we please walk up to Orchard Terrace, cos I want to see the cottage that I lived in'. And there were six lovely little stone cottages when I was there and we went around to have a look and they'd been converted in to three so they knocked each pair in to one to make them — cos they were very tiny, to make them and they modernised them and they looked, to me, absolutely dreadful. They'd got new front doors, new windows and it didn't suit — it didn't suit them at all and I wish I'd never gone back [laughs]. That's the only place I've really been to and regretted.

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<sup>6</sup> 30 min

Interviewer: I don't have any more questions. Is there something that you wanted to add, that you feel like you haven't had a chance to talk about?

Jean: I don't think so. I think I've covered most things. It's been quite enjoyable talking to you anyway [laughs].

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

**End of Interview**