

Interviewee: Rita Lewis

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 26th January 2013

Interviewer: This is an interview with Rita Lewis and it's Saturday 26 January 2013 and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. Ok, Rita, if you could tell me when you were born please.

Rita: I was born in 1930. So I was nine years old when war began.

Interviewer: And whereabouts were you born?

Rita: Well, in the East End of London, in Stepney. I lived with my mother, my mother work as a tailoress, my father was a cabinet maker. I have an older sister, four years older than me. She was at Secondary School and I at Primary School.

Interviewer: So when did you start school? What year did you start school?

Rita: I don't remember but I think I went to a nursery when I was about two and I don't know when I transferred to a proper school. I can't – about five, I think.

Interviewer: And were you in school nearby to where you lived?

Rita: Yes, oh yes.

Interviewer: Can you remember any of your schooling, kind of before the war?

Rita: Oh yes, I remember a lot of it. I remember the girl I sat next to and the one behind me. I remember some of the teachers. I remember the building. The building has actually just been knocked down and turned into flats only last year. I remember a lot about my early schooling.

Interviewer: What kind of – what kind of hours were you in school?

Rita: 9.30 to 12.30 and then we came home. Then we had a two hour dinner break because everybody went home for dinner and there were no school dinners. And then 2.30 to 4.30 so it was sort of two separate sessions.

Interviewer: Ok, did you go to the same school as your sister?

Rita: Well, we did and then, of course, she left when she was eleven and went on to a Secondary School.

Interviewer: So what can you remember from 1939, or especially the outbreak of war in September '39?

Rita: Well, I remember the year before. It was thought that war was imminent and we had a practice run and because the government wanted children, brothers and sisters – siblings – to stay together it was arranged for me to be evacuated with my sister and her school. Because children were evacuated according to the school they went to. The whole school went. So I was evacuated with her school and her school was in the City of London. So I went to her school and we had a practice run that year and then we came back and it was all quiet for a year.

Interviewer: So this was in 1938?

Rita: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: So what can you remember from that practice evacuation?

Rita: I can remember that my mother didn't have enough money to buy suitcases. She had to go and borrow. I think they were about five shillings or something but she didn't have it. We were pretty poor. But I remember the evacuation itself in '39.

Interviewer: Yeah. So when were you evacuated? What date was it?

Rita: September 1st, that was two days before war broke out. We had to gather at my sister's school, which I said was in the City. They marched us to Liverpool Street Station and we got a train. We didn't know where we were going. Our parents didn't know where we were going. They just had to make sure we got to school and that was all. There was no information given about anything. We got the train at Liverpool Street and I remember somebody asked, it was a warm day, because I remember we stopped at a station enroute and one of the girls leaned out and asked one of the porters could they give us some drink of water. We were thirsty. They said we were going to Ely. We'd never heard of Ely. None of us had ever been in that neck of the woods before. I think the most anyone had ever gone is down to Southend. Then we got to Ely.

Interviewer: Do you remember how much – what your parents told you about being evacuated?

Rita: No, I don't think they told me anything. I don't remember them saying anything about it. It was sort of a big adventure, you know, going off.

Interviewer: Yeah, and can you remember what you had to take with you?

Rita: Well, not much because we had to carry our own cases so a nine year old¹ couldn't carry much. We didn't have much clothes anyway. About one or two changes, night things and so on.

Interviewer: And you went with your sister's school?

Rita: I went with my older sister.

¹ 5 min

Interviewer: Was your school evacuated as well?

Rita: My school, I found out afterwards, they were evacuated to Ross-on-Wye, which was in the West Country.

Interviewer: But you were evacuated with your sister's school to keep [Rita: Yeah] you together.

Rita: I found there was one other girl the same age as me that was also going with her older sister but there were very few younger ones.

Interviewer: And what happened when you came to Ely?

Rita: We got out at the station and they marched us in a crocodile to a Primary School and we went into the hall and there were those long, low benches all round the hall. We had to sit there and in the middle were all these people who were, well, if think they were ordered to take evacuees. I think someone, an evacuation officer, had gone round and said 'Right, you'll got a spare room, you'll take one' and whatever. They just picked us out, picked us out like apples in the market. Nobody wanted two sisters it seemed and we were left almost to the last. But they just picked, you know, they just came along and picked, 'Well, I'll have that one' and 'I'll have that one', and so on.

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

Rita: Well, I thought, you know, we were just stuck there, left, and thought, nobody wants us. But we were eventually picked up by somebody, by Mrs Cooper.

Interviewer: When you came to Ely, did you get any kind of food/drinks?

Rita: I don't remember that. I do remember we were given stamped postcards to send home to tell our parents where we were. So at least they had an address for us. But I don't remember refreshments. I mean, I sure we did get some but I don't remember that.

Interviewer: So eventually you were found a billet?

Rita: Yeah, Mrs Cooper, who I think must have been in her sixties. She was a retired woman and she must have been that age because she had a single daughter, who was about forty, living with her. So she must have been quite elderly.

Interviewer: And what can you remember about her?

Rita: She was a very, very house proud woman. She was one of these people who had carpets and rugs on top of the carpets. When we came down in the morning we were not allowed to go back upstairs again until we went to bed because we might wear out the carpet. Even on Friday nights, my sister washed my hair and she had to towel it dry before I went to bed because we couldn't come downstairs again, because we might wear out the carpets. It wasn't very comfortable as you can imagine but we were only there for about a month and then she decided she didn't want evacuees

anymore. She was going to take soldiers instead. I remember, although I was only nine, I remember thinking, how can soldiers be nicer than us? Two little girls. But, of course, she got more money for soldiers than evacuees. So we were only there for a very short time and then we went to another family, temporarily, who were much nicer, for a very short time. And then went to a family called the Parsons, Mr and Mrs Parsons. He was, I think he was in the Air Force. She had two daughters so she got on well with two extra girls.

Interviewer: And how young were the daughters?

Rita: I think one was about my age and one was a bit younger, Phyllis and [pause] Sybil, I think. Yeah. They were nice. We were, I think, reasonably happy there.

Interviewer: Ok, so the family that you stayed with between your stay with Mrs Cooper and the Parsons, what kind of family was –?

Rita: I remember we had our first Christmas there. Being Jewish we had never celebrated Christmas in any way. Well, they had a couple of sons who were older, I think, teenagers, I think they were, and they told us to put our stockings, socks or stockings, on the end of the bed on Christmas Eve. I heard in the night somebody coming in. I didn't know what it was. When we woke up they'd put coal and oranges and things like that² in our stockings. That was my first experience of Christmas, never celebrated it before.

Interviewer: Do you know if there was any effort made to place you with a Jewish family rather than a Christian family?

Rita: Well, what happened was because I couldn't, when we got to Ely, I couldn't attend the same school as my sister because it was a Secondary school and they had all their classes and things all organised. But the Jewish Free School, by coincidence, happened to be evacuated in the same area. So we, this other friend of mine, Laurel, the other girl that was my age, we went to school at Jewish Free School. They opened up the classes there. So because we couldn't go to the Ely schools because it was a different education authority. We used some of their facilities sometimes but we didn't go to their classes at all, not to their schools.

Interviewer: And how was the Jewish Free School then?

Rita: Oh, that was fine. It was fine. What I do remember at the time was that every now and then we got girls came in, 'cos it was all girls, they separated girls and boys. Every now and then girls came in that didn't speak any English and I didn't realise at the time but, of course, they were people from Europe that had managed to get way and come to England. I didn't really understand why, you know, they came and didn't speak any English.

² 10 min

Interviewer: Did people explain to you about the war? Did you understand what the war was about?

Rita: Not really. Well, we heard the news. We heard the radio news so we knew what was going on but it was all quiet then. In England anyway, it was quiet then, in the early days. So we weren't involved. We just carried on our everyday life. You know, going to school, playing with friends in the evening and so on.

Interviewer: So when war was declared, you were evacuated, 'cos you were evacuated on the first, so then when war broke out on the third you were with Mrs Cooper?

Rita: Yeah, that's right. I still remember the broadcast, the radio broadcast. But it didn't mean anything to me.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt when you heard the news?

Rita: Not really, no. I was too young to really understand. Nine years old, you don't really understand all the politics and so on.

Interviewer: Ok. So if we go back to the Parsons then. Could you tell me a little bit about the family and your stay with them?

Rita: They were very, very nice. One of my most endearing stories is that we had a cousin called Mari, who was in London, and we wrote to all our aunts and uncles and cousins regularly. And this Mari never ever wrote back to us, and she used to write in purple ink, that was her sort of signature, purple ink. We used to say, 'Oh, if Mari ever writes us a letter, we'll put the flags out', just sort of a saying. And one day we came home from school and there was a big Union Jack flying on the roof and there was a letter from Mari written in this purple ink. But, you know, I think things were very content there.

Interviewer: And did you get along with the two girls?

Rita: Yeah. Yes, I don't think there were any problems at all. I can't recall any difficulties with them.

Interviewer: Were you treated in the same way by the parents?

Rita: Yes, that's right, yeah. We gave them our ration books and she just cooked for all of us. No problems.

Interviewer: So can you tell me a little bit about what you got up to when you were evacuated?

Rita: What I?

Interviewer: What you got up to? You were in school and?

Rita: Well, we did a lot of country things which we'd never have done in London. I don't remember much about what I did then but I remember a lot more later on when I went back afterwards.

Interviewer: Ok, so when did you – how long did you stay in Ely for then?

Rita: We stayed in Ely till about April. [Interviewer: Ok] Then it was very quiet. There didn't seem to be anything going on in London, nothing about the war. Lots and lots of children came back home. Because it was so, education was so haphazard in London, they opened up a school near to where I lived that was an all age school from four to 14. We all went into one class³ and so on.

Interviewer: Ok. How much contact did you have with your parents whilst you were evacuated during the first period?

Rita: After a little while when the parents realised where we were, I think the ones from my sister's school got together and about once every two or three weeks, or once a month, they hired a coach and came down to us with presents and so on.

Interviewer: So all of the parents came?

Rita: Well, quite a lot I think, yes.

Interviewer: Do you remember writing to your parents as well?

Rita: Yeah, and we'd write to them, yeah. So we were in touch with them. Cos there weren't telephones then, mobiles, emails – nothing like that [laughs].

Interviewer: How was it being away from your family? Cos you were so young being evacuated.

Rita: Well, I don't think I missed them particularly then. Because I remember that first Christmas we went to the market square where the coach was coming with parents and my mother wasn't on it. But one of the other women gave us a big carrier bag with presents and said, 'Your mother couldn't come'. I remember my sister cried and I didn't. I said, 'Why are you crying when we've got all these presents?' So I wasn't very aware of the fact that they were away. Not then, I think it was later on by the time I got 11 or 12 that I realised more about being separated from them.

Interviewer: And how did you travel back to London then?

Rita: Train, yeah.

Interviewer: And your mother came to meet you [Rita: Yes] and travel back with you.

Rita: Yes.

Interviewer: And how long were you in London for?

Rita: Well, we came back about, say, about April and I then I think about the end of August or the beginning of September the bombing started and that was it. We were packed back up to Ely again.

³ 15 min

But this time when we got back the billeting officer couldn't find us a billet together. So we were separated. We went into different places. We had to stay with different families. I stayed with a family called Hitch, Mr and Mrs Hitch. They had four sons, one was in the Army, and a daughter who was a year old. I spoke to the daughter on the phone the day before yesterday. So we're still in touch, which is lovely.

Interviewer: Whereabouts was your sister [unclear]?

Rita: She was with a family called Norman, who just had one – and she kept in touch with them for a long time as well. I think we were both relatively happy with the places we stayed at. We were treated as one of the family.

Interviewer: And were you nearby?

Rita: Not far, not far. But by then I was 11 and then I went to the same school as my sister.

Interviewer: Was this a Jewish school as well?

Rita: No, no. It was just – Central Foundation, it was a grammar school, an all girl grammar school. So I used to see her now and again if, you know, if she tolerated her younger sister coming. But by then I had friends, you know, that went to the school and lived near to me.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about the family that you were billeted with then?

Rita: They were an absolutely lovely family. Mr Hitch had been in the Army in World War I and had been gassed and so I think he suffered a bit. Mrs Hitch did about three different jobs. She was a really lovely motherly sort of person. Then there was Roy, who was in the Army, he was about nineteen. There was Alf [sic], was about seventeen, or something like that, he was a coal man. And then there was Alf who was a year older than me and we were really good friends, Alf and I. There was a slightly younger one, George, and then there was Margaret, the baby. I learnt so much about country life. I learnt about gardening and all sort of things, climbing trees and all those kind of boyish country, 'cos it was all boys, boyish country pursuits, which I loved. I loved all that.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about education then when you were evacuated? Your schooling?

Rita: Well, as I say, we couldn't use any of the facilities. I mean, Ely High School was a very good school, we couldn't use, we couldn't use their school let's say and go. But they found rooms which they partitioned off with, say, one was a solicitor's⁴ office and they partitioned off one very large room with a curtain down the middle. And there was one class on one side of the curtain and another class

⁴ 20 min

on the other side. I don't know we just got through that. This is what it was and we did it. You know, we weren't bolshy kids in any way. There weren't any protest, no problems that I remember.

Interviewer: Did you go – what kind of hours were you in school?

Rita: I think the normal sort of hours from about nine till about half past three. Something like that. We had home work and things like that to do.

Interviewer: And what about your teachers?

Rita: The teachers were all single women. At that time married women weren't allowed to be teachers. The teachers were all evacuated with us and stayed in, I don't know, different rented places, I suppose, they could have billets. We'd see them around the town now and again. I think a couple of the younger ones went out with some of the soldiers. There was always lots of soldiers about. That was that, you know.

Interviewer: How was the reception when you came to Ely from the local community and from the other children?

Rita: I think at first they, well, I personally didn't have any problems but I think some did, especially if they were Jewish because they'd never had any Jews in the area at all. It's a very orthodox Christian sort of community, in that they have a wonderful cathedral there, Ely Cathedral. I think partly to get me out of the way they used to send me to Sunday school. So on Saturday I used to go to the Jewish Free School's Saturday Jewish services and Sunday I used to go to Sunday school. My mother was a bit worried about this and when she came down one weekend she went to see the teacher at the Sunday School who said, 'Oh, it's a shame Rita isn't a Christian. She would make a lovely little Christian' [laughs]. But, you know, you just got on with it, you know.

Interviewer: Do you remember if you experienced any anti-Semitism at the time?

Rita: I didn't. I think some might have done but I didn't personally experience any. I experienced much more in London than I ever did in Ely.

Interviewer: Did you at the time as well, during, I mean, leading up to the war whilst you were living in London?

Rita: Yes, yeah. I experienced more then. Yeah. I remember having a fight with a girl when I was about eight 'cos she made remarks about being Jewish and then something and I had a really fisty cuff fight with her. So I experienced more anti-Semitism here than I did in Ely.

Interviewer: So can you tell me a bit about the experience that you can remember the most – the most vivid memories [Rita: Of living in Ely] yeah, of evacuation.

Rita: Well, there were all these sort of, as I said, these country pursuits. Well, first of all I had a bike which I didn't have in London because the buses only ran on market days on Thursdays and

Saturdays. So everybody had a bike. Even as an 11 or 12 year old I would cycle eight miles with perhaps a chicken on one handlebar and two dozen eggs on the other to take to a relative of the Hitches. We went everywhere by bike which I loved, you know. Me and the boys, the Hitch boys, would go out to a field and look for mushrooms and go blackberry picking. In the holidays, sometimes in the holidays, we'd work for the local farmers pea picking. So they'd had four of us girls, 11/12 year old, they'd give us a sack and we got two shillings a sack to pick peas and we'd spent the whole morning to pick one sack of peas so we earned sixpence each and then again in the afternoon. We'd go strawberry picking and potato, something with potatoes as well. Yeah. All sorts of – because it was such an agricultural area we just did sort of agricultural things. The school rented out a very, very large plot which they divided up into separate gardens so every group of four girls had a garden to look after⁵. We got seeds and we grew carrots and radishes and things like that. But we were so excited so we'd pick up the carrots when they were about two inches long and eat them when they were tiny. So we did a lot of that kind of agricultural things. We learnt about that which we'd never have done in London obviously.

Interviewer: So was life quite different in Ely?

Rita: Very, very different. It was a completely different thing. We didn't have buses at the end of the street and, I mean, there were pavements and so on. Oh, when I got to the Hitches they didn't have electricity. They had a gas mantel in the middle and when we went up to bed we went up to bed with a candle because there wasn't any electricity. But they did have a house and a bathroom which was more than we had in London.

Interviewer: So did you live in a flat in London or a house?

Rita: We lived in sort of three rooms above a shop which we rented. Whilst I was away we got bombed and came home one holiday and found that we were living somewhere else. That my mother had found us a flat.

Interviewer: Were you told when you were away [Rita: Was I?] When you were evacuated and your house was bombed in London [Rita: No, we weren't told], were you told then?

Rita: No, we just came home and found that we'd moved somewhere else. But there was such chaos in London, you know, so much bombing and ruins and things so you just took it as that was it. That was the status quo.

Interviewer: Did you realise what was going on in London with the bombing?

Rita: Yes, we knew that. Yes, 'cos it was on the news so frequently. Although I think they did play it down a bit, you know. They didn't want too much about it. They wanted to keep peoples morale high.

⁵ 25 min

Interviewer: And what kind of contact did you have with your parents then?

Rita: Well, we still wrote to each other regularly. In the school holidays, sometimes we'd go home for a few days. Take a chance with the bombing and go home. Sometimes, not my father, 'cos my father was away doing war work, he was building Army huts somewhere out in Hertfordshire. So I don't think my mother saw much of him either then. But my mother would come down and the Hitches, I told you they were a lovely – Mrs Hitch was so lovely. When my mother came, although she had a small three bedroom house and although she had living at home three sons and this little daughter and me, she put my mother up and my sister 'cos she said, 'When you come down you don't want to be separated from your other daughter'. So she had about seven or eight of us all living in this house.

Interviewer: And what did your mother do during the war? Did she do any war work?

Rita: No, she didn't, no. She just carried on being a tailoress. My mother did her war work in World War I.

Interviewer: So how old were your parents when you were born?

Rita: My mother was 31 when I was born. So she was forty when the war broke out so she was a bit old for war work then. My father was 43.

Interviewer: Was your father called up?

Rita: No, he wasn't, no. He wasn't – he got called up in World War I. But he wasn't English. He was Russian so when he got called up they couldn't have him in the Army. They said, 'We don't want you here' and they shipped him off to Russia and when he got there the Revolution started. So he was there for the Russia Revolution [laughs].

Interviewer: So was your father born in Russia and then moved?

Rita: Yeah, I think they came over when he was about a year old and my mother also as babies.

Interviewer: How long did you stay in Ely for then, the second time?

Rita: Until about, um, until the ordinary sort of bombing had sort of finished. Because they were busy, well, 1943 I came back. About Easter 1943 I came back and by then I went to school. I went to the same school there and I remember pretty full classes so most of the girls had come back to London by then. I knew some of them that had been at the school in Ely but, of course, there were lots of new ones that had been evacuated in other places and come back to London. But they were pretty full classes.

Interviewer: And do you know why you returned to London?

Rita: Well, because it'd got quieter⁶ in London. The ordinary bombing, the sort of night after night after hordes of bombing – bombs planes coming over, had stopped. But what we did have then was the V1s and the V2s which were quite different, irregular and spasmodic.

Interviewer: Were there any talks about you being evacuated in '44 then?

Rita: No, no, never ever talked about it again after that.

Interviewer: Do you know why that was? Cos many children were evacuated in '44.

Rita: I don't know. I think because so many came back I don't think they wanted to start the process over again.

Interviewer: And how was it coming back to London?

Rita: Well, you just got on. You used to get up early – you used to go about seven or eight o'clock in the evening you used to go to the air raid shelter. We used to go to an air raid shelter called the Tilbury, which was originally a very large docks warehouse. Very, sort of, secure building. They'd set it all up with bunk beds and toilets. They had entertainers came in the evening and everybody had their own bed, a designated place. People had bedding that they left there, blankets and pillows and things. About seven or eight o'clock in the evening we'd go there and spend the night there and about five or six o'clock in the morning you'd get up and go back home. See all the red lights in the sky from the buildings that had been burning. You could see it from there 'cos it was in Aldgate so it wasn't far from the docks and so on. You'd go back home for an hour or two in bed and then go up and go to school. There were never any excuses at school why you were late or so because war was on or bombing was on. You still had to do your home work and attend all your lessons and so on.

Interviewer: Had much changed in London then when you came back?

Rita: Well, there was so many bombsites. Massive bombsites everywhere, I mean, you couldn't go down any street that didn't have bombsites, you know, shrapnel and things all over the place. Sometimes you couldn't cross the main road 'cos there were Army convoys which could take us half an hour to go through as you weren't allowed to cross the road.

Interviewer: And how was your relationship with you parents when you came back to London?

Rita: Well, fine. No problem just carried on. I think most people did.

Interviewer: And with your sister as well?

Rita: Yeah. She came back after me because she'd gone into sixth form and she wanted to finish her sixth form education.

⁶ 30 min

Interviewer: So when did she come back?

Rita: She came home about six months later. She wanted to stay and finish her exams.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about the Hitch family then? Did you stay in touch with them?

Rita: Yes, well, I did – we used to write to each other now and then. When I got married it sort of stopped. I stopped for some reason getting in touch with them. Some years later I was teaching and we were taking a group of children up in Norfolk for a week for a course or something or rather. Sort of an outward bound of course and I remembered, we were going to stop at Ely for a couple of hours when they went round the cathedral and so on, and I remembered that the older son Roy had joined the Post Office there. So I wrote in care of the Post Office thinking I don't know if they'll find him, you know. And they did and he wrote to me and we met up and went out we had a drink and a chat about old times and he gave me the addresses of his brothers and so on, and we started to write regularly. I just kept in touch all the time.

[Pause. Looks for photo album]⁷

Rita: Here we are, that is Alf Hitch. He was the one a year older than me and his wife and that was my son and daughter-in-law. We went up there, went out for lunch with them. They took me for a ride all around Ely and showed me things that were different and things that were the same and son on. So we kept in touch all the time.

Interviewer: So how easy was coming back to Ely then after the war?

Rita: Well, it was lovely, I mean, he said very much had changed but there was so much that I remembered, you know. Back Hill or Fore Hill and the market square and the cinema, Land Street where the best hotel was and so on. Things were just – the outer areas have changed. There was more countryside then. They've built up and there were a lot more houses. The house were we lived was a Tesco Car Park 'cos they knocked that down.

Interviewer: And have you found that after the war that you have talked about your experiences of evacuation with your family or with other people who have had similar experiences?

Rita: Not so much with my family because we talked about it all the time when we were coming and going and they knew what it was. You know, there weren't long periods – only short periods when we were separated 'cos, as I say, my mother would come up at weekends when she wasn't working and we'd go back in school holidays. So we were in touch all the time. When I got married, Mrs Hitch and Margaret came to the wedding and Margaret was a bridesmaid and that was lovely. Just to see them again. I went off on my honeymoon and my mother entertained them. Margaret said she remembers they took them to Madame Tussauds and a couple of other places in London.

⁷ 35 min

Interviewer: If you'd summarize your experiences of evacuation in a few sentences?

Rita: My summary of it was that it was very well organised and people were very compliant with everything. People didn't protest. They just went along with whatever was organised. You had to go on masse somewhere, people just went. You know, the fact that I don't remember any of the mothers saying, 'Oh, I don't want my child to go', or children crying and saying, 'I don't want to leave'. This was what you were supposed to do and we all went. I do remember though, by the time I was about 12 I had this little mantra that I used to say on my way home from school. I used to say 'When I get back to the Hitches, mummy and daddy will be waiting there for me to take me home to London'. So although I didn't, I couldn't, understand why I was doing it, I realised that when I got older that I must have missed them a great deal. Otherwise I wouldn't have been saying that every single day.

Interviewer: How old were you when you left Ely then?

Rita: 13.

Interviewer: So was that a hard time to be away from your family, growing up and becoming a teenager?

Rita: No, because 13 year old then wasn't like a 13 year old now. I was a child. You didn't feel, the way teenagers are now, I didn't feel that until I was about 14 or 15 sort of experimenting with lipstick and things like that. You were still a child with socks and so on.

Interviewer: When you were evacuated the second time was the process of being evacuated, the journey, was that –

Rita: Well, I just don't remember. I was saying that, something must have happened. We went back individually rather than on masse. There must have been somebody there to organize things, to give us billets and people to stay with.

Interviewer: Did a lot of your friends – were they evacuated in '39 and then came back and then evacuated again in '40?

Rita: I don't know 'cos most of my friends were primary school and went somewhere different. So I didn't see them. There was just a couple that I saw when I came back in 1943⁸. One particular friend, Olga, who I've seen since. But otherwise the friends that I had when I was nine I didn't ever see again. Because they went off somewhere else and when they went to their secondary school it wasn't the same one that I went to.

Interviewer: Do you remember how that made you feel? Kind of having a set of friends and then being separated from them?

⁸ 40 min

Rita: No, I don't know. I just – because you were evacuated and I went with my sister and all her friends I just, they were my, the next lot of friends in a sense. The fact that I had a sister with me made a lot of difference, a great deal. I don't know how I'd felt I'd gone alone. She looked after me. She darned my stockings if I got holes in them and she was like a little mother to me.

Interviewer: You must have – you stayed in four billets when you were evacuated, how was that? Living in so many different homes with four different families?

Rita: I realise that the first one weren't happy with and the next one we knew it was temporary but when we got to the Parsons, which we were there for quite a few, quite a while. You know, I was quite settled there. I was quite happy. It was only that we were coming home, which was more exciting obviously. Then when I went to the Hitches I was there for about two and a half years so that was, you know –

Interviewer: Do you know why you were placed in a temporary billet then from Mrs Cooper? How long were you with that family for?

Rita: A very short time, a few weeks. Also in the meantime, I don't know when it was, when I came back from evacuation, the first time, when I went back to Ely the second time, I'd picked up, I don't know, because of what was going on in London at the time, I picked up scabies, which is a very natty skin complaint. I was put in a kind of hostel there to recover from it until I went to the Hitches. So I didn't go to the Hitches straight away. I must have been medically examined when I got back to Ely and they found that I had this complaint.

Interviewer: What can you remember from the hostel?

Rita: Oh, it was awful. We had to have baths in sulphur and then stand up naked and the doctor or the nurse painted us with this yellow stuff to burn it off us. I mean, nowadays I suppose you'd have antibiotics but they didn't exist then. Painted us, and it was just very, very uncomfortable, burning and awful.

Interviewer: Were many other children in the same situation?

Rita: Yeah, there was quite a lot. I mean, they opened up this place especially for sort of displaced people, if you like, which I was one. My sister didn't go. My sister was alright, she went straight to the Norman family when we got back. But I was there for a short while and went to the Hitches when I was fully recovered.

Interviewer: The Hitch family were they kind of working class [Rita: Oh, very much so] or middle class?

Rita: He worked, I'm not sure what he worked at, but he wasn't very well because he got gassed in World War I. She did about three different jobs. She did a school cleaning job, so after children left school she'd have to go in and clean. One of my jobs was setting the table for the evening meal

because she wasn't there. She also, I remember really vividly, she used to repair the flag on top of Ely Cathedral because she had a sewing machine. When you're on the ground and look up it's just a big flag waving but when it comes down it's enormous. I mean, those flags were easily the size of this room, you know, huge things. They get ripped about being on top of the cathedral and one of her jobs was to repair it. Patch it up and repair it. The other thing, Mr Hitch and Alf, the older boy at home, who was a coalman used to go out fire watching. Their stint was on top of Ely Cathedral. I think once a week it was their job to spend the night upon the top there and look for fires, fire watching. Although she had no electricity all the cooking was done on a coal fire, on a black range, and she⁹ did roasts every weekend and baked cakes and everything on that. No gas or electricity cooking.

Interviewer: How was it when you were evacuated in terms of rationing? Were you well fed?

Rita: Yeah, yeah. I was treated just like the rest of the family. It wasn't separate food for me. I did know some people when they first got there who were given their own ration separately on a plate. This is your butter, and this is your cheese and your egg and so on. But I was never treated like that. You just handed over your ration book and you just was one of the family. Although, they had an abundance, quite a lot of food there compared to London. When I came, used to come, home on the holidays I was always given some vegetables and things like that and fruit and so on to bring home. I mean, in London you couldn't get anything. It was dreadful, dreadful shortages. I remember one of my mother's neighbours came to the store and said, 'Could you give me half an onion?' because you just couldn't get things here. So they used to pack me off with a case full of vegetables to bring home.

Interviewer: So did your mother have a good relationship with the families that you were evacuated to?

Rita: Yeah, certainly with the Hitches, very. I told you, when Mrs Hitch and Margaret came for my wedding, they stayed at my place, well, they had my room and my mother took them out and about. Yes, I think she was very grateful that we stayed with people that were so caring and warm and lovely.

Interviewer: In terms of education, do you feel that your education was interrupted at all when you were evacuated?

Rita: Well, no, strangely enough there were 30 girls in my class, my secondary school, and when we were 16 we all took what was called School Certificate. I suppose it's like O-levels, you know, very, very formal written exams and almost everybody passed, 11 of them matriculated and we all had interrupted education. All of us, every single one had been away from school, had suffered air raids were you couldn't sleep some night and so on. But it just carried on, there was no tolerance. It was absolutely zero tolerance for a lack of it. You just had to do it. You had to, it was – I admire what the teachers put us through because I became a teacher later on and I realised what they had to do.

⁹ 45 min

Interviewer: Did you always want to become a teacher?

Rita: No, I didn't. I went to university when I was forty when my three children were at school and I thought, 'Oh, I'm not going to carry on doing office work' and I went to university then.

Interviewer: What kind of effects do you think that evacuation had on you growing up?

Rita: Well, it certainly taught me a lot of country ways, country life. Taught me a lot about gardening, about flowers, about birds and things like that, that I'd never have had if I'd stayed in, although I suppose people do, but I do. It showed me other ways of life.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you feel that we haven't talked about that you would like to add any particular memories of evacuated?

Rita: Well, I think I've touched upon most things.

Interviewer: Ok, thank you very much.

End of Interview