

REMINISCENCE THEATRE ARCHIVE OF PAM
SCHWEITZER

INTERVIEW WITH MRS GRABINER PART 1

Sara: This is Mrs Grabiner speaking – well it's Sara here but I am talking to Mrs Grabiner. Right so if we start with your memory of your parents.

Mrs Grabiner: Yes, I can start from the First World War. And we lived in Preston in the north of England, where my father was the insurance inspector for the whole of the north of England and there was five daughters, I was the youngest of five. When the war finished my father decided to come back to London because there was only a very, very small Jewish community in Preston and the girls were growing up and he wouldn't have like us to mix with anybody but the Jewish families at that time. He asked for a transfer but didn't get it - he'd worked for this particular insurance company for nearly twenty years – however he got another very, very good position...

S You said that you had come back to the south of England?

G Yes before we went to Preston we had always lived in London. He'd worked in London with that particular insurance company yes, and then before the war was transferred to the north of England, and we stayed there right through the First World War. And then couldn't get a transfer back because his figures were very good, he was very good at his job. However he found another very good job with another life insurance company and we came back to London, just for the reason because there were very few Jewish families in Preston.

Being after the war there weren't a lot of houses to choose from, we managed to get rented accommodation for the time being. Two of my sisters were working at that time three of us still at school. We hadn't been back very long, maybe perhaps six months, when my father became ill and in the course of the next two years had both legs amputated, well above the knee.

S So when you came back to London you were living in rented accommodation, do you remember where that was ?

Mrs G Yes, in Hackney.

S Do you remember the road?

Mrs G Yes, it was called (273) crescent in Hackney.

S And were there lots of Jewish people living around there?

Mrs G Round and about yes. Things were very difficult indeed. There was no sick benefit, there was no unemployment benefit, there was absolutely nothing.

S So your father had only been working for that firm for...

Mrs G Only six months, they were very good to him, they kept him for six months on full pay, did their utmost, but of course after a time it really was impossible... he had to resign because there was nothing he could do.

S So what happened when he became ill? Did a doctor come round to the house?

Mrs G He used to Guys Hospital and they were very kind because at that time you had to pay for medical attention, but they never ever sent him a bill. They had the finest specialists from everywhere, but they could do nothing. It was a sort of illness that now I suppose... a circulation problem, now you hear about it much more, but then they just had to amputate and that was the only thing, and they had to amputate well above the knee because there was no circulation lower down to the heel.

My mother did everything for him, she was the most wonderful woman, I never heard voices raised in anger or.... there were never any quarrels, he just took it, she did what she could, there was absolutely no money coming in, only from my two oldest sisters that were working, things were very difficult indeed.

S So if you would have had to have paid for medical...

Mrs G Oh it would have been absolutely impossible.

S So you just had enough to pay for rent and to feed the family

Mr G Yes and that it was just very, very difficult.

S What kind of things did you eat then?

Mrs G My mother was the most wonderful manager, she would buy at that time from the butcher. If you bought bones, they weren't like bones that you can buy today, they had meat on them and ... she would take the meat off them and mince it and we'd have soup. We had a coal range in those days ... a range with an oven and a coke fire and the saucepans used to go on the top of it so all day long there were these bones boiling with barley or whatever. So there was always soup and she used to do what she could with the meat, the little tiny bits of meat that we had ... if she would have bought a boiling chicken ... she would have the liver that she would chop, the neck that she would stuff, the chicken itself. So there was a whole meal for all of us.

S Then she would make the soup from the bones?

Mrs G Yes. There was a meal for all of us, she really was a wonderful manager. There was always a good meal; there was always a hot soup. In those days there were no fridges and the shopping had to be done everyday, things were very hard.

S And what about the house? What was the house like that you were renting?

Mrs G The landlady was a very sweet lady and we had two upper room and two lower rooms, there was one very large upper room that held two double beds and one single bed and all five of us girls were in that one room, with a large wardrobe. There was no bathroom but everything else was... there was an indoor toilet, which was quite something in those days.

S You had an indoor toilet?

Mrs G Oh yes, because most people had an outside toilet. And there was a small garden. And my parents had the other bedroom. Then downstairs we had a kitchen and sitting room, those years they used to call it the parlour. Sundays we used to turn it in to a washroom you see.

S Sunday was a washday?

G Sunday ... because everybody was at home and we all helped. Because washday then was very difficult, everything was done by hand.

S so what happened on washday from when you got up?

Mrs G On one wall... it looked like a cupboard, there was a flap that used to turn it up... and when you turned it up there was a copper. So that used to be filled and lit with coal, paper, wood and that used to heat the water- so the washing was done there in the kitchen. Very difficult, because there was only soap powder in those days, you know Hudson's Powder, a block of soap and a rubbing board.

S and how much would the soap powder cost? Can you remember at all?

Mrs G In those days a double bar of soap was perhaps four pence or five pence.

S And would it take you a whole block of soap to do your washing?

Mrs G No, and Hudson's powder mostly. With delicate things like underwear they'd use Lux flakes. But they were expensive so most things were done with Hudson's powder, and soda as a water softener.

S And then you had a board?

Mrs G Yes and rubbed on the board and boiled in the copper. All the whites would go in the copper and then they would be blued and starched and put through a mangle.

S Where was the mangle in the house /

Mrs G That was in the garden.

S And then where did you hang the washing ?

Mrs G Outside. In the winter, when we all went to bed, that would be hung in the kitchen, that would be folded, put through the mangle, hung in the kitchen, and left to dry over night. Most of the time we were in the kitchen ... when the washing was finished this flap was let down again, a nice white tablecloth put on it, and then it was a very cheerful kitchen. A big range with a big fire.

S Did it take all five of you all day to do the washing ?

Mrs G All day sunday yes. Sunday evening there was always visitors. We had the finest families visit us. My father was a clever man, an interesting man, a good conversationist and people used to come from all round. Also we had at that time David Weitzman living with us - the M.P., the Q.C. - because he was billeted with us in Preston and when we came to London he wanted to study in London and he had a room in the same house... a garden room on an upper floor. He was always with us. He used to call dad the governor and mum "mam" because he'd been with us for so long that he was like one of the family ... he was bought up as a brother. There were always conversations, it was always cheerful and bright, there was always someone there, very nice. There was a minister at the local shawl and he used to come everyday to see dad and have a conversation with him .. South Hackney Shool, I must admit they did nothing to help. My headmaster at that time was very kind and he spoke to the minister at the shawl at that time and said. "the mans brain is good, its just that he hasn't got any legs, any of your people got work for him to do ?" I mean he was able to do it, his writing was very good. His brain was good, it was only that he couldn't walk, but no one seemed to do very much except the rabbis who saw my father- and he suggested that we should sell something from the house so we started to sell groceries and cigarettes from the house. Everything was delivered ... as a weekly ordered. Which was very difficult indeed. Can't say that there was a great deal of profit but it was something, it kept us going. And when Pesach came round the shawl used to give out food tickets to various people on the understanding that they would come to us with the food ticket and we would provide them with whatever was on the food ticket and then the shawl would give us the money. Whatever was on the ticket we would supply it and then after Pesach we would give all these food tickets in to the shawl and we would get paid for it.

S If I take you back again to when you were younger ... you moved down t London and both your sisters were working, what were they doing ?

Mrs G One was in a tailoring workshop and one was a bookkeeper in a toy manufacturing office.

S Were you quite used to mixing with non Jewish people?

Mrs G Yes. And then my second sister married David Weitzman's brother and they were married for two years and she was pregnant and they had a car smash and the baby died

but she didn't miscarry and blood poisoning set in and she died a month later. She was twenty six.

S What was your school like ?

Mrs G They were wonderful, I had a French mistress who was a most wonderful woman, she was very good to me, but not in school. In school she didn't want to show favouritism. But out of school there was nothing that she wouldn't have done.

S So you saw her out of school?

Mrs G Oh yes, I stayed with her mother one year, she wanted me to go for a tour to France, some of the children went to France. She said, "If I would pay a half of it, could your parents pay the other half ?" Well that was impossible. Well she said, "while I'm away with the children would you care to stay with my mother ?" so I did. her mother was on holiday at that time in (534). And , Miss (Groverite 535?) was the most wonderful woman.

S Were you good at French ?

Mrs G I wasn't a bad student al rround. My headmaster was marvelous, all the teachers were wonderful.

S What was the discipline like at school ?

Mrs G The teaching was very much better than it is today. I can remember things all those years ago because we really had to learn.

S How did they make you learn ?

Mrs G I remember in the French lesson each girl had to take a lesson on whatever she chose. I remember choosing a big picture . And we had to speak in French all the time. And we had to ask question about whatever we had chosen. And I chose a picture and we would point out the things on the picture and the children would say in french what it was. Each girl had to do one a week, I remember that very clearly. And then we did a play in French. we did little red riding hood. actually school days were lovely, they were wonderful.

S Did you have quite a lot of schoolfriends ?

Mrs G No. One particular one and I kept friendly with her for many years after that. We lived near to one another, she was Jewish.

S Were they mainly Jewish children at the school ?

Mrs G Yes, and they were very bright,. they turned out some wonderful students from that school. Most of them did really well. Of course Hackney was a better neighbourhood then than it is now.

S Was your friends house similar to yours ?

Mrs G Well, they had a shoe business so they weren't as short of money as we were. They had a bathroom and a fridge and all the things that's normal people in Hackney didn't have. They were very nice people, a very happy family.

S Did she have brothers and sisters ?

Mrs G Yes, she had a brother and a sister and a cousin, an orphan cousin, living with them, so there was quite a big family. And a bachelor uncle. It was a big family , always very bright and cheerful.

S So when would you go and play there ?

Mrs G When I was at school we didn't play so much, there was so much to do. After I left school I only worked for a very short time , because it was at that time that my sister died, my mother was ill, my father needed constant attention, everything brought to him, and I being the youngest - and of course would have earned the least - stopped work and stayed at home. And then I helped with the business that we ran from the house.

S What age did you leave school ?

Mrs G Fifteen.

S Were you sad to leave school ?

Mrs G Yes because I enjoyed school, they were very kind to me, all of them. There was a different atmosphere in the school, there was more personal atmosphere. If we had

sports and we took my father over the headmaster used to come over and chat to daddy and the teachers used to come over and chat to him and afterwards when I left school and we sold cigarettes and things. The headmaster and the teachers used to buy ... I used to take them over once a week.

S And you were quite a bright student at school ?

Mrs G Yes.

S Were your teachers Jewish ?

S No.

S So what happened for Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashana?

Mrs G Oh it was quite in order that we didn't go to school then.

S And did the school shut down ?

Mrs G No.

S Was there any discrimination against Jews ?

Mrs G None whatsoever, none at all, no.

S Do you remember any of the games that you used to play in the playground ?

Mrs G Netball of course. When we were younger I suppose hop scotch ... we used to go swimming once a week.

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