

Interview with Doris Bliss

With Pam Schweitzer and Clare Summerskill

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Doris: I remember that next door the father had made this glass enclosure, over the end of the garden which housed the toilet, because they were outside toilets, and on this occasion my friend Rene called over.....they were only little four foot fences...and she said: "There's a cat on the roof!" I said: "A cat?" We were then about nine I think, it was before my father died because he went berserk! 'Cos I was always collecting cats, anything that was in distress and my mother used to say: "It's not lost, it's not lost!" Anyway I'd gone over the fence and there was this cat on the back and it was on the roof, meowing like mad and she said: "We've got to get it down," and I said: "Well, how can we?" Well, her father used to do building and there was quite a tall step ladder so we hauled it up onto this glass roof and she said: "I'll go up. You hold the ladder and I'll go up!" Well she was about three rungs up this ladder and my mother came up and said: "What the...do you think you're doing up there? Get down this minute!" And she was absolutely white because the thing could have gone straight through the glass roof and there were the two of us up there on the glass roof with a step ladder trying to get a cat down! Goodness did we catch it! And in the meantime the cat had found its way along and down the way it came.

In the Smiths family Rene was the baby. Mrs Smith was the one that blew the gas stove up...She was quite a tubby lovely, motherly Mrs Smith, and her husband used to do odd jobs, building and decorating and so on. Mrs Smith was the local midwife who would come and do everything for everybody. I mean her and my mother they really were very good in the road when you look back on it, the things they did.

Pam: Did she help with the laying out?

Doris: Oh she did everything, Mrs Smith did. You could always call upon her to do everything.

Pam: She wouldn't have been trained then?

Doris: Not at all. There was one occasion with my brother and I, we were about fourteen then, and there was this awful explosion and we looked at each other and Mrs Smith came staggering out the back and we looked over the little fence and all her hair was singed and everything. And what she'd done was she'd turned the gas oven on and then forgotten to light it for a few minutes and then went there with a match and of course the whole thing had exploded and she was staggering out there.

Doris: (Cont) And my brother and I were horrible kids and we were laughing like mad! Of course you would to see someone staggering like that. And my mother was so upset about it all and said: "Have you burnt yourself?" Well she hadn't but her hair was all singed and it was a terrible shock. Shook the life out of everybody as well as Mrs Smith! But my brother and I were more or less clasped together in that kitchen in silent laughter! Aren't children horrible?

She had two grown up sons that were already married when they moved there and then she had a grown daughter who married from there and that is the daughter that you've got the photograph of.

Pam: The wedding in Collins Street?

Doris: That's right and Olive and that were bridesmaids. Not me, I was too poor looking. I remember I was just standing on the pavement looking on, you know. They were always beautifully dressed but no food and I always had plenty of food but wasn't very well dressed!

And then the Smiths had a son that was my brother's age. And there was Rene who was two or three months younger than I was. And then eventually they went to live near Lewisham.

Pam: Could you tell me a little about the Reed family?

Doris: Mrs Reed had lots and lots of children. She lived at number 21.

Pam: Were you involved with them in any way?

Doris: Oh yes. We were all like a big clan together. What one did for one, one did for the other, sort of thing. And I remember going and staying there for a couple of nights while my father was dying at home, when I was about ten. But everybody looked after everybody. It was one of those sorts of atmospheres down there.

Pam: What was your father's main job?

Doris: He was in the Arsenal during the First World War. It was he and Olive's uncle, her father's brother who was working with him and there were three others, I think, all sort of friends, and they were working in the Arsenal filling shells with this TNT or whatever it was and they used to call them the Canaries because they were completely yellow. And they had no masks to do all this and that was 1918 when the war ended and my father died in 1926. But it had taken all those years...the TNT had eaten the lungs away and all five of those men died within six months of each other. My father first and then Olive's uncle died and then the other three. Not that old. Forty seven my father was.

Clare: And in those years his health had deteriorated presumably?

Doris: Well I suppose it did gradually you see, you then developed a cough. And I remember the morning when all this happened. My mother said that he just fancied a long walk and Kidbrooke then was just farms, and he'd gone all the way round and he said: "I really enjoyed that." And I think he'd been in the house about half an hour when he haemorrhaged. And that was about the November and they took him to hospital and he died in the January.

Pam: And between the end of the war and then what sort of things did he do?

Doris: Between the end of the war, I remember he had a lot to do with the horse bus or something....like a cab it was and there was something like a large cab. I think it was an old one he was going to take to Chislehurst and he said he was going to take me and I had great fun because apparently years ago you used to have these things and there was a little flap in the roof near the driver who was sitting up top, which would be my father and you used to have to put your fare up through this flap. And I went to Chislehurst with him and we brought another cab back. He did that and he probably did do lots of other things.

Doris: My mother lived at 24 Collins Street but more opposite 23 there used to be this huge shed where the horses would be put because everything was delivered by horse in those days and there were these railway horses, these great big Shire horses, huge great things. And the horses in there of a night time, they were banging and crashing their hooves because of the rats running around. Because we used to get rats in the road which would come out from underneath and run along the road and dart back again because of all the feed there you see?

Pam: So what were the horses used to deliver?

Doris: They were horses for the railway and they would deliver things. I think the men used to drive them because they used to come out. There must have been deliveries or something they were taking about.

Pam: So your father was working with horses as well?

Doris: Not for the railway. He worked more for Tillings, which used to be the old buses.

Doris: Frank was the only boy I ever had. He moved to the village when his father got a gents hairdressers shop in Tranquil Passage. And Frank was about twelve then and I used to see him because I used to help in the greengrocers which was just opposite...anything to get money, you see? And I used to look out and see him come out and he'd be walking along and he was quite a chubby big boy and in those days they used to wear short trousers, didn't they? And he used to have his long socks on with all these pencils and rulers stuck down the sock and I used to look at him and I used to think "You stupid thing!" You know, walking along like that! It really did annoy me to see him like that! I'd see him on the odd occasion and didn't really take much notice of him and then on one occasion I think I was seventeen, and he was helping with his father and we were in that concert hall and there was one of these magic slide things and people were talking about the adventures of what they'd done and then came the collection plate, well I hadn't got any money and I don't suppose he had! So I mean he came from nowhere and he came from nowhere and we both got jammed in the door, trying to get away from this plate! I was making a quick getaway and so was he. Of course we got down those steps and we both roared with laughter and that was it! Of course he was grown up then. No pencils down his socks or anything!

After a while he went into the RAF. I think he was there about a year. And I know he had to buy himself out. But before that, I was still at school and he would perhaps get Thursday afternoon off and he used to say: "Could we go out?" And so we went down to the Gaumont which was at Lewisham and I can always remember he bought me these maple brazils. They were lovely. Then of course we went home and of course my mother wasn't aware of this so I'd shot upstairs and hidden these maple brazils and it was all quite good fun.

Doris: Olive didn't enjoy her first job at all. It was hours on your legs. Hours! I don't know how she managed it!

Pam: I know that your mum slaved to keep you at school while Olive went straight out to work. Was your mother very ambitious for you?

Doris: My mother had always had a hard life. She was three and a half pounds when she was born and carried around on a cushion for a long long time. And they really didn't give any hope for her. But she died when she was almost ninety nine and she never had a days illness!

Pam: Did lots of people have street parties at the end of the First World War?

Doris: I think everybody did, yes. There was a big long table in the street. I can only remember falling over!

Pam: Do you remember the soldiers coming back at that time?

Doris: Yes there used to be lots of soldiers 'cos they'd always come onto the station, and apparently my aunt, the youngest one, she got married during the war, 1916, and the wedding was held at mothers' at 24 and mother used to tell me it lasted a week because the soldiers would come over the fence from the station to have a drink in the house! For a whole week they were doing this until they shifted off!

Pam: One hears that there were a lot of disabled people around after that war. Do you remember seeing any?

Doris: I do. I remember Lewisham really, you know? They'd be there with no legs, sitting on the pavement with cards in front of them. They were just washed off. Nobody wanted to know about them. Disgusting really when you think about it. I mean some of them must have been dreadfully wounded.

Both my father's brothers were in the war with Pat Greenfield's father. But everybody had got somebody who'd lost somebody. And the Whites, with all their children, who lived next door to the Reeds, Mrs White lost four brothers in the war and there were just two girls left.

Doris: One girl, she was older than me, she used to work as a chambermaid, I know it was in one of these boarding house, hotels up in Bloomsbury Square or somewhere like that, and apparently this man was staying there and she was a quite the bottle blond, you know and the parents had a country accent. I don't know where they came from, very strict she always seemed to me, the mother, but apparently what had happened was that he had come down and asked the mother if he could pay for her to be home so that he could take her out when he wanted to. And he would come down on the odd occasion, (he never lived there) and away they would go, you see, even for the day. And the mother would go with them, and I can see them now going along in that little cart with mother sitting up the back with the two of them in the front. And he used to take them out and this went on for quite a time. And he was a dapper little man, older than her, and I can see him with his black jacket on and he had a homburg hat and spats, and that's what affected me, the spats!

And they used to come and go and she would be dressed up to the nines, in fur, and mother would have a fur stole and all these flashy dresses. And the girl would have a sale of dresses now and again, well I mean it wouldn't suit anybody living in the road. These were dresses obviously that he'd bought when he'd taken her out to places, you see and of course I suppose they thought that eventually they were going to get married and probably it was quite a big step up for the daughter. But this went on for a while you know, and then I think it was when Hitler started playing around, getting very big over there that he just didn't come anymore. And the brother had gone up, 'cos he had this big warehouse furrier place in the East End, to see what had happened because he'd not been down and they hadn't heard anything and the place was completely empty and he'd gone.

He used to take photographs when they were out and she used to show me the photographs.

Pam: What were they photographs of?

Doris: They used to have a lovely run down to Portsmouth, this was the day one, but where they used to go at weekends I wouldn't know. I think it was just her and him at weekends. But the Portsmouth thing her mother used to go as well and they'd be standing there at Portsmouth, well of course there's all the boats at the back of them.

Pam: Were you convinced that that was the explanation for the story?

Doris: Well everybody was. Because everybody was a bit suspicious of him although you wouldn't really voice an opinion.

Pam: And he actually paid for her not to go to work so she would be available for these Trips?

Doris: Yes, wherever he went, he would take her, that was the point of her being home.

Pam: And what can you remember about the Communist?

Doris: Mr Pratt, his name was. He would always be dressed in a black suit and a black cap, just like Lenin and in the house would be pictures of Lenin, 'cos Lenin had died I think and there was all these black drapes over these pictures. There were pictures of Lenin everywhere. And I remember the wife, she was a poor little downtrodden wife, Winnie, everybody called her. Winnie Pratt. And she had the two children. But the children were never allowed to go to parties. They were never allowed any sort of laughter of any sort. They might have played out on the street but they were never allowed to go into anybody's house for parties or things like that and on one occasion he wanted to go to Russia and he'd taken one of Mrs Reed's sons, which was Joe and they'd gone out to Russia, because I suppose he'd been telling Joe all about everything. I don't know how they got out there but they both got to Russia and within six months they were back again so he obviously didn't like it.

I remember the little girl and when I was about eighteen or nineteen I'd be coming home from work and she always used to run up to me and as I say I had a mania for everybody being washed, and she came up to me one day and said: "Hello," and I said: "Hello, what have you been doing?" Because she was pretty grubby and I said: "Those hands are dirty". And she put them behind her back and I walked home and the next day I came she ran up to me and show me her hands and they were spotlessly clean so every day after that she used to come and show me her hands and I used to give her a penny. She used to wait for me to come home from work.

Pam: So her dad went around trying to recruit members, did he?

Doris: Oh obviously. I would think so.

Clare: Tell me about your courting days.

Doris: There wasn't a lot of things to do in those days. I mean you didn't have a lot of money to do things. We went to the dances that they used to have at that Parish Hall. You all had your dance dresses. And Frank didn't like dancing but he did go to.... I think it was Marjorie Barton that used to be round there to learn how to dance. So he did that for me! And we used to go to the dances. My brother would be there. He was lovely. Terrible tease, but beautiful. We were so close.... Used to be quite a lot of us would all go to the dances.

Clare: And presumably you can remember the day Frank proposed to you?

Doris: Oh yes. Well you'd do it in drifts and drabs in those days. It wasn't a bended knee or anything like that. You'd sort of just drift into it and suddenly you'd got the engagement ring staring at you from a box! It was quite nice really. We were engaged for a fair time. We got married when we were twenty three. But you just sort of had the one boy really.

Clare: And your family liked him, did they?

Doris: Yes, everybody sort of took to him. He wasn't a chap that mixed very well but I understood him. Perhaps two opposites. But we got on well. He was in the Army in the Intelligence Corps 'cos he had quite a good brain.

Doris: My very first job when I left school...I was eighteen...

Clare: Now that was quite late compared to some others?

Doris: Well yes, you see I went down to Lewisham College when I was about twelve. My mother said: "You're not ever going to work as hard as I have all my life". And that was her focus that I wasn't going to have the life that she had where she had to take anything, cleaning, whatever she could get, just to get money. And of course I left school at a time when there was a lot of unemployment so it was hard to get a job although I was a short hand typist. My first job was just doing the post. That's all I could get. That was up in Lilywhites in Piccadilly Circus. And I was never out of work. I used to go from one job to the other. So I started there and I had a pound a week.

Doris: (Cont) That was it. I used to work from nine in the morning 'til six at night and half day Saturdays. I used to catch the last work men's train which was a quarter to eight which was sixpence and I used to give the money back to my mother and she would give me back the fares and then I'd perhaps get sixpence or whatever to get a sandwich at lunchtime. And then I would say I need a new this or a new that and then she would see that I got everything I wanted.

Clare: What was you happiest time?

Doris: Working in the Solicitors in The Strand. I was about 24 then because war was on. I worked right through the war. I used to travel backwards and forwards up to town all the time. I used to do fire watching and so on.

Doris: Mother would leave the school at about half eight and then she would come home about nine and have a cup of tea or whatever and then she would have to go to clean some of the houses where she would go. This particular one was in The Close, off Eliot Vale and she used to go and work in there. That was the one where I used to have to go and do the Sunday afternoon cleaning and washing up, and she'd go there and work from about ten o'clock to half twelve or something like that and she used to get two and sixpence for that and then she'd probably come home and do shopping and so on and then she'd have to be back at the school at four o'clock. And then she would come home about seven o'clock.

On one occasion when she was working in that big house opposite Prince of Wales pond, that huge big white place...Mrs Japp and her husband lived there and on this one occasion mother was there and they were away and I think there were two housemaids there and Mother used to go in and cook and things like that and as I was walking over the Heath there were these two children who were really quite nasty kids, you know and they said: "Well where do you live?" So we were just coming near the pond and I said: "Over there". That was the huge house you see. "You don't!!!" So I said: "Yes I do." I didn't look as if I could live in a tent probably at that time! Well you know what kiddies are..."Let us see you go up and knock on the door then!" So of course I went up to this front entrance, didn't I? Rang the bell and the maid answered the door and of course she was all done up. And she looked at me and said: "What are you doing walking up here?" So I said: "Those girls don't think I live here."

"Oh." She said. So of course she opened the door and in I went. It was lovely! It was absolutely lovely! And I went in there and downstairs to the kitchen and my mother said: "What are you doing?" So I explained and they all laughed! They thought it was great fun. So I had something to eat there and then I walked back to school but after that I was treated with great reverence by these two girls who really did think I lived in that house!