

Valerie Jarvis - First interview with Mr James Kebble (Greenwich)

13.2.95

Lansdowne Lane, Charlton SE7.

Valerie Jarvis: Can you start by telling me where you were born please?

James Kebble: I was actually born in East London, in the East End maternity hospital, next to the clock, as my grandma used to say as we used to go past and embarrassed me!

VJ: That was on the other side of the river?

JK: On the other side of the river. But in 1938, we moved from Silvertown, south of the River to Asof street, which is in Greenwich, just off the Blackwall lane, and we lived almost towards the edge of the river. And I can just remember Christmas 1938, because number 36 where we lived was opposite a lamp post, and the salvation army came and played underneath, and I can remember being in bed, and it was just like a Christmas card - it was snowing - and this magnificent noise started up. Ompa, ompa, this type of thing. And I was in bed, and I can remember asking, shouting out - any excuse to get up! - what was going on, and I can remember hearing my mother saying, 'for heaven's sake pick him up and let him see what's happening!'. And I can remember being carried into the front bedroom and looking down, on a level with the lamppost, and seeing all the light gleaming off the brass instruments, and the snow. And this wonderful noise...

VJ: You must have been very little.

JK: I was very young, I was about 2 and a half, 3. But I can remember that, and I can also remember being in my push-chair, and those memories are tied up with the war, because we were taken shopping to Lewis's store, which was just opposite Trafalgar Road, by...opposite Christchurch, where Christchurch used to be. And I was left in my push chair - I can't remember that detailed, but what I can remember is that a lorry pulled up, and the sideboard of the lorry came down, and it exposed to me what children would call these days, aliens! They were on a civil defence exercise, and they were already wearing their gas masks. And the gas masks had enormously long trunks that came down to a cannister around their waist, and great goggle eyes. And I can remember deciding that this was no place for Jim! And I was out of my push-chair, and legging it as fast as I could down the road, with my mother running after me, and slagging these men off for frightening the life out of me! And that must have been the time of the Munich - though I can't remember Munich as such...

VJ: What year would that be?

JK: That was '38, end of '38, and that was round about the time of Munich. But I've got quite a few of these splinter memories, little cameos that I remember, but they are

accurate, I know that. And the funny thing is, my brother, who's 8 years older than I am, talks about Munich, in Asof Street, and how people didn't really believe it, because the papers were still very strong in those days. They didn't really believe it was going to be peace in our time until they saw it, until the evening paper seller came round, because he used to, every evening, shouting, Star News and Standard, came round shouting. And one or two bought a paper, and it was then finally acknowledged, even though it had been on the wireless - it was the wireless in those days - that it was peace in our time, it was only when they finally got the paper that they believed it.

My next memories - and I've shown you my authentic piece of paper! - is when I was registered - I can't actually remember this, but I've got the piece of paper - was when I was registered with my mother and my brother at Glenestal?? Road School, for evacuation. And I went through a period of gross unhappiness, when I was evacuated and taken around, and I ended up at my father's sister, who lived in the middle of Kent, in a very isolated part, on top of the North Downs, and we ended up there in 1940. And that was a very interesting period, because it was the battle of Britain, and the Battle of Britain was not at all the way I've seen it depicted in films and that, it was, mainly, a lot of noise. But way up, high up in the air, very occasionally you would hear an aeroplane - very occasionally - going, and disappear. But in that part we were also shelled, because they were beginning to shell Dover, and they used to get long over-shells sometimes, which came towards Hithe and Canterbury, this type of thing. And the all pervading memory I've got is the army convoys, which were on manouveres all the time, and preparing to fight the invaders.

VJ: It was an odd place to evacuate really, wasn't it?

JK: Well, this is why it became very interesting. We ended up there because I'd been so unhappy. We weren't in London, because we were convinced London was going to be bombed flat - that was the mentality in those days - but what amused me was that I've got all that memory of the invasion - the possible invasion - the army convoys, they used to stop and my mother and Aunt Queen, who we were staying with - and I was absolutely fascinated by this isolated cottage, so different to anything I'd ever known - but they would stop, and they would make enormous jugs of tea, the old water jugs that used to stand in the bedrooms and this type of things. And they would make them full of tea for the soldiers, and anything.

VJ: So you weren't really that far removed from the action...

JK: Well it was action but it was distant, and the real near stuff was the soldiers. And we were told on no account, ever, to take the pennies they used to leave behind for this, and we used to covert these pennies, and watch my mum pick them up and had them back to the officer and say, 'put them in the mess funds', or something like that.

VJ: So it was you and your brother, and you mother was it?

JK: It was me and my mum and my brother, yes, and my father's sister whose cottage it was.

VJ: He stayed behind, did he, your father?

JK: Yes. But then what amused me was that Dad must have decided that invasion was getting far too close for comfort and we were in the wrong place, which is exactly what you just said, and this is the type of thing you don't think about for years afterwards. So we were brought home. I can't remember going home, but afterwards I thought, 'well this is funny, I wonder if...having lived with his sister all those years, to be away from the supposed bombing, we were then brought home and we left his sister exactly where it was going to be invaded. And I've never quite understood that! And I never thought of writing to her before the day she died, so I haven't been able to ask her, you see.

VJ: But she survived the war?

JK: Yes. But we brought home, and by extraordinary coincidence, we were taken, after we'd been home a couple of days, to see gran and the family, who lived in Poplar. And of course we had to go through the Blackwall tunnel. Now that in itself, for a little boy, was very interesting, because to go through Blackwall tunnel, in the entrance of the tunnel, they had Lewis machine guns, guarding the tunnel, on each side. And also, mounted guards with bayonets, came onto the platform of the bus and wanted to see everybody's identity card, and I thought this was wonderful.

But what I hadn't realised, or what we didn't know was going to happen - this was September the 7th, 1940 - and my next memory from that is hearing bombs dropping. And we were walking along Commercial Road, and heading for Linfield Street, it's called now, but we always called it Sussex Street, which was the original name of the street where grandma had lived. And we had to run for shelter. I can remember again my mother, who was quite dominant in her way, although she was taking us for shelter. And what triggered her off was, we were walking - Dad always said, just like Corporal James??, 'don't panic, don't panic!', that was the actual phrase that was used - so we didn't panic. But my mother suddenly said, 'Look, soldiers are running! If soldiers are running, we're going to run!', so we ran and we followed the soldiers. But dad was delegated to look after a blind man, and that again was unusual, because not only children had been evacuated, but blind people at the same time were evacuated with the children. But, because there'd been no bombing as such on London - or not much - they were all filtered back to London, as we had. But we ran and we went into Poplar recreation ground, which my mother knew extremely well - it was the area she'd been brought up as a girl. And we ran into the air raid shelter there...

VJ: Was that an underground one?

JK: That was an underground one. And in those days, they were just deep trenches that were roofed over, sort of cut and cover kind of thing. And we were in there, and the bombs literally dropped all round us, and the lights failed. But my father, being a sort of civilian fireman, and this type of thing that there was in those days, stopped the panic because he had a couple of lamps which he carried about with him, and he put those on. And I can remember my mother putting her hands over my ears, and I thought for years afterwards that this was to save me from anything from the bombs, but apparently, there was an old lady using fearfully bad language, who said, as my father quoted me afterwards - when I was old enough to talk to him man to man - but I

won't use the actual language. She said something like, 'Lord Hawhaw?? promised only to drop Keating's powder on poplar, and he's dropping bleeding bombs!'. Do you know what Keating's powder is?

VJ: No, I don't know that one.

JK: It's for fleas - it's what they used to give animals for their fleas. And Lord Hawhaw - going off a bit - was actually believed by the people. He was, to us in Greenwich, useful, although he was also laughed at, he was useful. For instance, he told us - which you won't see on the media - because everybody tells you about being bombed at Christmas, we were never bombed at any Christmas. And Lord Hawhaw told us, in 1940, that we were going to have 2 of 3 days off, and we did! As far as I remember it was Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. And in a strange way, they believed Lord Hawhaw and didn't believe anybody else. And he delivered.

Anyway, we then headed off for Grandma. And Poplar had been very badly hit in that first afternoon - and in fact north of the river was worse hit than south of the river on that day, although the south of the river did take quite a bit. And I can remember seeing crates being loaded, bodies covered and this kind of thing. But again being a child - I can remember my grandmother being appalled, and angry with my mother when we got there; 'fancy bringing the children out on a day like this!' - this type of argument took place. And well she turned round and said, well 'If we'd known it was going to be a day like this, we wouldn't have come through the tunnel!'. You know, this type of silly argument started. But what impressed me more than anything was, because of the bombing, the gas was off, so she couldn't make us a cup of tea. And grandad had left the tap, because it was just a kitchen sink - things were in those days - and he turned the tap on for when the water came back on. And the water came back on while I was there, and it was green, bright green, and I was fascinated by this. And afterwards, I understand, it's because they put too much chlorine in, to cover up against germs, and this type of thing. And that has stuck in my memory for years! And with everything else going on - bombs, machine guns, and everything else - my prominent memory, for the year or so afterwards, was green water!

Anyway, we then tried to go home, which wasn't easy, because Blackwall tunnel was closed, and so we then thought we'd catch a number 56 bus which would have taken us onto the Isle of Dogs, and we could have walked along the foot tunnel, to where the Cutty Sark is now. We were actually very lucky, because the Isle of Dogs was closed - it had been so badly bombed that we weren't allowed on there. And funnily enough, the foot tunnel, that afternoon, was hit. In fact, even to this day, if you walk through the foot tunnel from Greenwich to the island, you can see the thicker part, at the Island part. And that was where it was reinforced, where it was hit with the bombs in the war on that day.

I can remember again, quite vaguely, being shunted around Poplar, because everywhere we wanted to go there were tapes. The new XB signs - unexploded bombs - one of which went off. And I can remember rising about, I thought about 6 foot in the air and coming down again, it was so close to us, and such a hell of a bang. And we all looked at each other, and decided we were alright, and we carried on, and they finally ran the old 108, back through Blackwall tunnel. I was very disappointed, because all the soldiers had disappeared this time - they were probably very busy elsewhere! But I can remember my father taking me upstairs, as we came out of the

tunnel, coming back into Greenwich, and I can remember to this day, all around us, flames were leaping into the air. And it was like what a child would call a disco these days. And being a child, I thought this was marvellous. I only wish I had a talent to draw or paint, because I've still got these pictures in my mind. My mind seems to photograph things, it seems to freeze a still. I've got this going way back to very dim memories - the frozen stills of memory - and I can remember sitting on top of the 108 and seeing all this, and thinking how marvellous it was. And then we got off in Blackwall lane - and this shows how people were so different in those days, socially as well - I can remember that, as we turned round the corner, to come into Asof Street - the bus stop is on the opposite side of Blackwall lane, you see, so I had to cross Blackwall lane and then turn off into Asof street - everybody was at their front gates (because they hadn't taken the railings or anything by then - they were still there). They were at their front gates, and they knew that we had gone - as one said - to the other side of the water, and they knew the other side of the water in ??? jargon, caught a packet??, and they wondered about us. And as we got around the corner, I can't put it better than the fact that the street sighed. 'There they are, they're alright!', and I could hear it, moving down the street. And everybody then - we had been to where it had happened - and I can remember feeling so important, and I can remember trying to add my little piece to everything...I've never changed!

VJ: How old were you then?

JK: I was about four. And I can remember feeling so important, because it took us ages to work our way down the street, because we had to tell - every group asked us, 'What's it like, what's happened over there!', and my father and mother, talking and telling people. And the strangest thing is, with memory, I can remember sitting down to supper. I'd had my supper - it was sandwiches - and we thought it was all over. It was quite a nice evening, and it must have been about seven, half seven, eight o'clock when we got home. And the air raid warning went, and they were coming back! And I can remember saying, 'Oh no!'. And I did this trick with my mind - I photographed the plate that I'd just cleared! And it was an eight sided plate with a duck sitting on it, with a woman in clogs, with a funny hat, and a windmill on the other side. And I can see the colours on it, and it had 'A PRESENT FROM RAMSGATE' written on it! And I have been looking for one, at boot sales and everywhere, because if I can find one I will die, because no one will know how precious that is to me!

VJ: What happened to the original? Did it get broken?

JK: No idea - the house was bombed several times, all sorts of things happened. And I then went into the shelter, and then it becomes almost impossible - probably because of my age - to put anything in sequence and put an actual time. But the shelters themselves were quite interesting, because I've shown you the stuff earlier on. There was a hell of a fiddle going on in those days. And the shelters on what is now called the North Thames peninsula - a phrase which would have made us roll up with laughter in those days! - were different from other shelters. They were built on marsh grounds, so they had to be surface shelters. We couldn't have Anderson shelters that you dig in, because they would have flooded, so we had surface shelters. And that again brings up, looking back on it, very interesting... We shared with next door, but

next door soon moved out, and this again was something that happened. The heavily blitzed areas - of which Greenwich was one - literally emptied. But we were didn't empty because I was far more frightened of being evacuated again - it was such a traumatic experience that I believe, even the doctor (I can remember my mother told me before she died - she died at the end of the war because of the war), but even the doctor said, 'Don't take him away'. They used terms like 'fret' - 'He'll fret away', and things like that in those days. But in all truth, whether I would have, or whether my mother didn't want to leave, I don't honestly know! This is why we didn't move away, but half the street emptied - people moved away, and interesting things happened.

VJ: They moved away for the whole of the rest of the war then?

JK: Yes. And as we got used to the blitz, we adapted so quickly. I don't just mean us as a family, people are incredible. For instance, we cut gates, all along the black garden - and they were only little, pocket handkerchief back gardens between Asof Street and Ruces?? Road - but we cut gates, so that if the incendiaries fell, we would not have to break a fence down, we could open the gate, and take our little garden hoses through and do things like that. Except for one man who wouldn't have a gate - wanted his privacy - and I can remember my father was absolutely delighted, because, by sods' law, his was one of the first houses, and dad was a fireman, and I think he wielded quite unnecessarily an axe to smash the fence down to get to him! I mean that was quite fun!

But there were so many daylight raids, that you don't hear about much. I can remember when the house in Ruces?? Road got burnt down, and the woman, called Mrs Smoker - quite and interesting name - and Dad went in because they said somebody was in there, and he came out with a canary in a cage. And he was not best pleased, because he said, 'If I'd have known he was a canary, I wouldn't have gone in after him!'. And all these little memories come up, all sorts of things...the tunes of the day stick in my mind. And they were terribly...my brain tell me that they were corny, they're cliched, they're all words like that, but to me they're marvellous, because they represented the time. And people genuinely believed in those type of things, or the few of us that were left in Asof Street did.

VJ: Like the alternative version of 'Run Rabbit, Run'!

JK: That's right! But's it's not like the present day alternative version!

I can remember we were 'evacuated' in inverted commas, because after one daylight raid, the whole of the factories behind us were burning, and they were oil tanks that might have gone up. So we were evacuated overnight, to Blackheath. Now this was quite a procedure, and I took a lot of notice of this. I can remember, I was rather worried because I felt quite grown up by then, as lots of things had happened to me, and my pram - my old Bassonette big pram, type of thing that royalty was taken round with in the 1940s! - was taken out, but I hadn't realised that this was not for me. This was to be loaded, and it was loaded with things that were precious to us then, because people were socially quite different, and my mother loaded it with our tin of red salmon, which was worth a lot of money, and things like that. And one or two items of cheap jewellery, that were very, very dear to her. And it was loaded up, and my

father's old naval kit bag was filled with other stuff, and the dog was taken and put on a lead. And this pathetic little procession, just like you see these days, in Bosnia and this that and the other, we headed off, up Blackwall Lane, past the Granada, on foot. We were told to go to the shelters near Princess or Wales pond, pub, so off we went, up Vanburgh Hill, this poor little procession of neighbours, and people that were left, straggling up. And Vanburgh Hill is, even when you're young, quite steep. But we got to Ulundi Road, people came out from a house, and offered to take us in for the night. But for some reason, we didn't want to go - I don't know what, but they said, 'Let us at least take the dog', so they took the dog, and off we went to Blackheath. I can't really remember getting there, but I can remember sitting in this cut and cover, again, shelter, on the long parallel planks that face each other - like the things that you get in church halls - and I can remember the lights. The little pearl and bare lights - the filaments and how things worked always fascinated me, and I can remember looking at those. And, like the lifelines on the side of a lifeboat, the emergency cable was looped between the lights, and this is where we come to my slightly rabblasian?? story that I told about!

At the end of the trenches, at each end, were the lavatories. And dad had to go, and while dad was in the lavatory, a stick of bombs went across, and the lights went out. And then one came on, or something like that, and dust was clearing, and people were sitting there. And when the lights came on fully, unfortunately the lavatories which had literally been flung together - it was a stable door, and the tops had been blown off, and so there was dad, sitting in all his dignity, looking at everybody else looking at him! But he was not a man to panic, so he did what a man had to do! But for years afterwards he argued with my mother - and I never really appreciated this until I got married myself and I understood him - but the argument was about the quality of the paper he'd been given. Now I won't go into sordid details!

VJ: Newspaper was it?

JK: No, it was the cover of a waxed load (laughs). And dad always maintained, 'you did that on purpose', and my mother would go, 'you silly old devil, how was I to know you were going to be bombed on the bog!'. But that was a row that went on for years! And it was bread that she'd picked up - the wardens had said to us, 'you've got to get out, you can't stay here', so we had to leave Asof Street, so everything had been packed in a hurry. And I said, 'we've been eating sandwiches', and so when dad asked for a bit of paper, that's what she gave him! (laughter) But after that, I can't put them in sequence, but I can remember I used to get into trouble, because very often, the bombs would drop before the air raid warnings, especially in the day time. I can remember we were machine-gunned. Whole areas, literally, began to disappear; Ballot Street disappeared, Grenister?? Road - the road itself, not the school - disappeared. All these various houses in Asof Street were hit, including our house. We continued to listen to Lord Hawhaw, but another, interesting effect with the wireless was that they used to switch off the local transmitter. And so if the wireless went off, because they thought the Germans were using that to hone in on, but they used to switch it off, and the phrase came about, which was widely used, that was 'wireless has gone!', and when 'wireless has gone' was said, we knew that, within a few minutes, we were about to be bombed. And it was my job - we lived next door to number 34, which was two old spinsters who ran a shop - and the best way to describe it without being

and machine-gunning. I used to love the flares that came down. They used to drop flares, which were called chandeliers, which lit the target, and they used to lay in for the old telecom??, cables, and this kind of thing. And I used to go out of the shelter and look at these like fireworks, and be dragged back in and be sort of pinned against the wall and told to stop being an idiot!

And I can remember my uncle, after our ceilings came down, and this type of thing, I can remember being heart-broken that my mother had said, 'We can't eat anything, we just can't eat anything! It's all spoilt!', and I don't suppose she was any too pleased either. But my uncle was shaken. And he said, 'I'll go and get some cigarettes', and we were a non-smoking family, but he was a smoker. And he went out to get some cigarettes, and he came back in a state of shock, because he couldn't get cigarettes, and he'd had to help lay out the bodies, because he was just about to go in the navy, in Blackwall Lane...

VJ: How old would he have been then?

JK: He wouldn't have been that old, he would have been about 30, just turned 30, I suppose. He was that much older, because it took a long while to be called up in that time in the war. In fact it wasn't done 'til the end of 1941-42 that the older men got called up - they believed in killing off the youngsters first, you see, then they could put the older men in. But I can remember that, and that again is vivid. Because to me, an adult was in a bit of a state of shock. And I remember my father taking him away, and families in those days couldn't afford a bottle of whiskey or anything in the house. And I can remember them...I think they went down the road, because somebody had some brandy or something, because he was that far gone. And funnily enough, the two of them, my father and uncle, went to work the next morning, and they both worked near Saint Paul's. As I said, my father was a spotter, on top of King Edward buildings, which he saved, so it can be privatised - and they won't print my letter about that either! - but, that funny little painting I showed you, is them walking along Leadenhall? Street, because they could only get on the boat as far as one of the piers, and then they had to walk through London, and they were walking where all the firemen had been.

VJ: Your uncle wasn't a fireman, though, was he?

JK: No, he was a post-office sorter, and he was working as a post office sorter until he was called up into the navy, shortly after that.

VJ: Your father never was, because it was the year of occupation wasn't it???

JK: My father had been in the navy in the First World War, he'd been through all this type of thing. That again, is a very interesting observation, and shows how the mind perceives something, because I can remember my father used to say time after time, my father was 16 in the battle of Jutland?, and in the middle of it, literally. And he used to come back, after London had taken a pasting, and he'd been there on top of the buildings through all of this, and my mother used to say, 'How bad was it?', 'It was a very bad night last night Cath, very bad, but never been liked Jutland', he used to say, 'never been like Jutland'. And again I had to really grow up - and I mean grow

up, become about 40 or 50 - before I realised that what my father had seen at Jutland, you couldn't compare as a young adolescent to a grown man.

VJ: You mean, as a 16 year old, he'd been hardened to what was to come?

JK: No, I think it had impressed him, you know, like the young idiot I was, rushing about picking up shrapnel, while we being machine-gunned in bombed houses. Rushing out - they literally would machine gun, and we'd be out to pick up the bullets - it was all a game to us. It was only when we began to lose relatives, and aunt so and so had gone and somebody else had gone other people had gone, and this type of thing, and as I got older and perhaps got a little more sensible - though there are people who'll say I never have! - I began to realise that there was more to this nasty little game than one realised. But this is what used to happen.

VJ: What were you saying earlier about the incendiaries?

JK: I've known my father saying that when he came back from London, that we've found another one of those incendiaries. And those incendiaries, well when you took the nosecap off, inside it said 'Made in Islington'! And we never found out if it was propoganda or...But I can tell you one thing, I have really looked into the blitz. And when I went to the M.O.D., because I was writing, for my own satisfaction, something about this, about this 'wireless is gone' phrase, and I said, 'Can you tell me exactly what happened?', he said, 'We're not allowed to tell you under the Official Secrets Act'! And that was about 40 years after. And I said to him, 'The Germans aren't coming back, mate!', but he didn't put a word to that. It's quite ridiculous, some of the things.

But living in an industrial area by the river, I have seen people's houses burnt out by the fireman on standing orders, had to go to industry first, because industry was part of the war effort, and again, there was quite a lot of ill feeling, sometimes, towards firemen for this type of thing. But they had their standing orders, and looking at it from the strategic point of view, that was necessary.

VJ: Yes, because this side of the river got bombed a lot more that North London didn't it?

JK: No, if you look at the bend of the river, this is where very often...the Germans used to approach from either the east, or the south-east. And they had these navigation beams, radio beams, with receivers in the aircraft, which they used to show them where they were. But the other thing is that, geographically, the bend of the river is so characteristic, that even a beginner pilot if you like, which later on in 1944, for the little Blitz, they used, even a beginner pilot knew where he was. But the other thing was, they were ordered to go in over that bend of the river. Now the chances are that the more nervous pilots, that's where they thought, 'right, we're here', and they'd drop their bombs and turn round - and you could hear them turning round at times. And so this part of the river is both the geographical navigational area, and the radio and the radio navigation aid area, and this is why this area was really the epicentre of the Blitz. And the more fashionable parts of London weren't hit badly, until the 29th, after Christmas 1940. And I can prove this from records.

And that again is very interesting; what do people mean these days by the Blitz? I mean - the Blitz to me is from September 1940 to May 1941. To be specific, from September the 7th 1940, to May the 10th, 11th 1941, which was a huge raid. And that was a terrible raid. And strangely enough, after that, we were sent back to my aunt, after that raid, and the Germans stopped bombing! So it sounds the most unlikely story, and I've heard people tell me it's unlikely, because I was going to write a novel, and wanted to pick a family, and put them in various places where things were getting very hot, this is where I'd have put the Kebble family! And my father did this with great ability, my old dad!

VJ: So how long d'you go back to your aunt for?

JK: We went back, and we decided by Christmas 1941 that they weren't coming back. There was great apprehension in the family, because we thought if we come back, it'll all start up again! But 1942 was very quiet, very quiet here, and 1943 onwards, it started up again.

VJ: So all this time, your father stayed in London?

JK: Oh yes, he had to, doing this kind of thing. And of course he was in the Home Guard, but on the bomb disposal - I've shown you a little handbook - and he used go away weekends. He'd work all the week, on duty, in Central London, and put his home guard uniform on, not a bit like 'Dad's Army', and go off at the weekends. And he had some interesting stories to tell about that - some of the ungrateful industrialists, who used to try to hurry them up, because they used to say, 'D'you realise this is costing us money?'. And what the Home Guard used to say back to them, I cannot repeat! But the people come together, you know...

Tape stops abruptly.

END OF INTERVIEW