

AGE EXCHANGE UK

INTERVIEW WITH ANNIE YOUNG

Zara This is Zara Portnoy talking to Annie Young about her life in the Jewish East End. First of all lets talk about your parents and where they came from and how they met and when they came to England and where they came to.

Annie: Well, my mother was sixteen she arrived in this country from a small village in Lodz called Zgierz. Like you've seen in Fiddler on the Roof, that sort of place. And she came to a brother of hers - my uncle Abraham - who was very well established in Canon Street Road in a large house with a workshop behind. And my mother, she was sixteen at that time - she was a beautiful woman, all of her life - had to do all the housework of a great big house near Frumkins, there were giant houses there at that time, four stories. Very big houses, on Canon Street Road off Commercial Rd. At the corners there was Fromkins always, the wine and spirit people. It was all kosher Fromkins, my wines came from there even when I got married fifty years ago. And my mother met my father, how I don't know, probably coming in to the house. He was ten years older than my mother. He was a very learned little man, he was self taught. He read the papers well - he always used to go to night school. My father was a machinist for Gents work. His older brother had a prominent tailors shop in the Mile End Rd and my father worked for him.

Z And did he end work early on a Friday night ?

Annie Oh definitely , my uncle was also a very pious man and as soon as it was E'er of Shabbas it was shop shut and everything. Oh yes. No work on shabbas - my father went to schule before shabbas and went to schule on Saturday. My mother dovened very beautifully, she was a very learned woman, she used to sit in schule at Passover and sit with a lot of women that couldn't read, she used to sit and read the Torah to them all. Self taught, you know. My mother never went to schule on a Saturday, she was always occupied. Every Jewish holiday my mother went to schule.

Every Friday night was like a ritual, one had fried fish, one had chopped fish. My father liked haemischer fish but my mother always managed to get these things ... I remember going shopping with my late mother, God rest her soul, there was always a market called Watney St. , which was much nearer to us, and then there was a very Jewish market called Hessel Street Market which was further afield near Commercial Road. But in Watney Street there was also a very good market. You could go out and buy a lovely ... and my mother was a great connoisseur of food. In broken English she'd say, 'not that for me, I want a Norfolk fowl'- that means a real country chicken you know and you'd buy a beautiful chicken, a four pound chicken, for three shillings! A four pound chicken for Yomtov would feed the whole family you know. And then she'd go to Blooms and there you'd go in and buy a pound of the best chuck streak for ten pence. The finest and the best, we always had the grandest to eat, always.

A four pound chicken was for shabbas - for yomtov it could have been two. For shabbas all my family would be at the meal - my mother, my father, my sister and my three

brothers. My mother got married in Stepney Green Synagogue, she was nineteen when she got married.

Z And her parents didn't come over for the wedding ?

No, they probably all got killed in the pogroms. My father had a brother Jacob who had a big tailor's shop. Then another brother Uncle Barney the youngest, very clever, they were very close.... And the three brothers and their sister Miriam was also very close. And my mother had a sister who came over, a widow with three little children, and they too were very close. They were in our house almost every day.

Life in the East was hard, I can't express the feeling that we had for one another, there was a lot of togetherness, a lot of closeness. People were really friends to you. If one knew a neighbour never 'had' for shabbas so they would share five shillings with somebody else. Now one wouldn't do that, one would be ashamed, but then it was an open book, you know what I mean. It was such a nice atmosphere but as I say the one who did the best trade was the pawn broker, that was called 'Jones' in Tomkin Street (?)

Z You were telling about 'the buildings' ...

A Well, they were buildings of ... a lot of very learned people have now been established from there - some are now M.P.'s. A big tenement block, wooden stairs, and everybody had to keep their wooden stairs clean, and there was gaslight. And we lived right at the top - the penthouse I called it, the gallery, they were four storey buildings. And down below there was a cellar that housed two (coppers) (glass/brass) coppers and they were for people to do their washing and if you got up early about four o'clock - there was about fourteen families to do their washing - you lit the fire and ran down with the baskets of washing and nobody could touch that copper. And the other copper might have also been used and that's how the washing was done you see. I remember one terrible episode - my sister, God rest her soul, had an overall and she had a needle in it and it was a bank holiday - I might have been about seven - and she had a needle in it with no cotton and my mother was washing on a washboard, a wasch-brettel we called it, and as she was doing that, the needle broke and went into her hand. And I remember my mother, may she rest in heaven, rushed her to the London Hospital, and she must have been in that hospital practically all day long and they could not find the needle, because a needle is steel, it broke and it travelled ... You went to casualty at the hospital. I don't think you had to pay. If you went to a doctor, you had to pay 1/6 and so forth.

In one of the 'buildings' downstairs was a butchers shop - 'coopers' the butchers - next door to them was them was the bagel makers, they did bagels. All the shops were Jewish shops, I don't think there was one gentile who lived in our block of flats. Not that I remember. Practically the whole block was full of Jews. And then next door Coopers the butchers, Friedmans the grocer shop - on the level , on the ground floor. Round the corner in (? Oxter) Street, which they now call Stepney Way there was a very big shop called Guards, the oil shop - you could everything from smoked salmon, sixpence a tin, beautiful herrings in great big wooden 'cooper' barrels. And opposite there were little houses, this is very important - now one looks for lovely curtains and lovely drapes in the windows but in the years that I'm talking about every little window had a little business. It was a window box, with a few carrots and onions and a few sacks of potatoes Mrs Silverman had - no carpets but a few sacks of

potatoes. Next door there was a person who had in her window ribbons, that my mother used to buy for me to do my plaits up with ... haberdashery. And next door they had, I remember so well - well they were rich - they had remnants of cloth to sell. Every little window was a sort of business.

And I remember having a terrible toothache and there was a Mr Roberts known in the East End of London and I had a terrible terrible toothache and I went to him and you would have thought he was going to hammer it out with a drill. He was six foot ... I can still remember the pain.

Z So he just sat you on a chair and pulled the tooth out ... he didn't use any anaesthetic ?

Annie No, no you must be joking. Nothing. I nearly hit the roof. He was known as the 'butcher'. I suppose he must have deadened it with something, must have put something on it.

Z So, back to the buildings, you lived on the fourth floor ...

A And I always remember that on a Sunday ... now I am very sensitive to people who are deaf and dumb, I understand them, but at that time there used to be an old gentleman who never used to knock on the door, he used to walk in and he was deaf and dumb and I was petrified ! I used to hide under the table because he used to make those noises you know, and I remember it till now. My father and mother understood him ... they made him a cup of tea, gave him something to eat, and something to eat, he might have gone to a few other people. A lovely old Jewish man. I remember this man coming to our house for many years.

We had two large rooms and they always looked beautiful. I think I slept with my sister and my mother and father had a little 'off' room somewhere where my parents slept and I slept with my sister. I remember a straw mattress. We had a what they call schluff-bunk , it was like a wooden thing that you sat on during the day and you opened it out to make a bed. I'd like to turn the clock back to those days. My mother was always working and always cooking. To two or three o'clock in the morning my mother worked.

Z Did you have to pay rent ?

A Of course! We paid nine shillings for the little house that we moved in to, that was in 19 ... the war broke out in 1914 ... I was about 11 when the war finished. My mother got to know there was a little house going and we moved. Beautifully kept, I got married from there. It was lovely, very very nice. There was two nice rooms downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs and like a kitchen thing with a gas stove which opened out on to the yard. My parents and my three brothers slept in the bedrooms and I slept in the lounge with my sister. Next door, Mrs Moskovitch, they bought a gramophone, you know the gramophone with a big horn, they bought 'My Yiddisher Mother' ,when it first came out. And in the summertime we'd all sit outside listening to that dramatic record ... all the neighbours would come. All the neighbours were Jewish, very nice people - only Maggie at the end was a gentile lady, she was lovely, and she used to come and light the fire for us on shabbas.

Z Did you know many non-Jewish people when you were growing up ?

A There weren't many in our road. Rabbi Lionel Blue, the Liberal rabbi, well you know his mother Hetty was a friend of mine and they lived opposite us in this little house, and her father was a cobbler, a shoemaker. You know he used to mend our shoes. And Lionel, who's now Rabbi Lonel Blue, he lived round the corner right next to where ... the back of Sidney Street, have you heard of the siege of Sydney Steet, a hundred years ago that was there were two anarchists living in a house and Churchill bought in the soldiers or whoever.... I'm going back a long long time ago. Some very nice people lived in that area. Aubrey Phillips the bandleader and his brother Sid Phillips he was a band leader at the Palladium and he lived in a little street next to us which was called Hawkins St, all the little turnings you know.

Z Did you keep a kosher home ?

A Oh very much so. I spoke English and my mother spoke broken English (she could make herself understood) but my father taught himself to read English. In the home we always spoke English although I can speak Yiddish, very well indeed, because my mother spoke Jewish – and I speak it exceedingly well. I heard a lot of Yiddish my parents spoke Jewish to one another. There was a little place called Sarners in Sydney St and in the window there was 'yiddisher letters written for people who can't write Yiddish'. And ,my father would go in there and pay the man a sixpence or so forth to write or read a letter in Yiddish. Life was entirely different then.

Z Did your mother wear a scheital (wig).

A Never, my mother was a very beautiful woman. The majority of people who kept a kosher home never wore a scheital, my mother had beautiful long fair hair. My father never had a beard, he was very modern , he used to line up all night to go to the opera for sixpence. When he benched he'd wear Tszitzas. I remember you could go for a walk in New Road at eleven o'clock at night, everything lit up, everything open, a wonderful atmosphere. You'd want a glass of lemonade. There'd be a 'tap', you'd open a tap and have mug of cream soda for a penny or you'd have a raspberry for a penny or a pineapple for a penny or a lemonade for a penny and if you wanted a wafer that was a halfpenny. My God it was lovely.

Z Did you ever go to Cheder (Sunday school) ?

Annie I did but not very often. I went a few times and I didn't want to know. My brothers went, I never attached much importance to it, I remember an old rabbi with a long beard used to come in to the house for sixpence a week, to teach my brothers. My nephews go to schule now and my brother - he lost his wife last year. Life my dear is entirely different now. Now I think that the majority of people are after the material things in life. I don't know if they are happier or if we were happier, we never knew any better you see. We were content with 'our lot'. But the people were so close - there was such a lovely atmosphere amongst the people. You'd get the odd one out but on the whole I think that life in general was much more tolerable. Now you lock yourself in and that's it, you dare not venture out. Then you could go out if one wanted to at twelve o'clock in the evening. There were sometimes when something untoward happening to somebody somewhere but nothing like today. We always had a string through our door night and day, open door... you'd pull the string and walk in. There' be a string and you'd pull and it was done in such a way that you'd open the door (often the key would be on the end of the string to open the door). No nuts and bolts doors on our doors dear.

Z At home who controlled the household, was it your mother or your father ?

Annie I can't remember my mother ever laying a hand on me or any of us. I can't remember my father ever laying a hand on me. They would never lay the law down, two very wonderful parents and I miss them more than ever now. We went to bed when we were tired, there were no restrictions, always got up for school, always went to school clean and tidy, with a new ribbon in our hair and clean overalls and plimsolls. I went to a very very nice school, Redman's Road area, one end of Jubilee Street stretched to the Whitechapel Road and the other side stretched to the Commercial Road. There were a lot of gentile people living there, very nice people in that area, one could never find fault with them. I was only thinking about this the other night, when I reminisced to myself. I remember when we finished school if we had a half-penny, there was a gentile shop called 'Jessop' where we used to buy a halfpenny worth of broken biscuits and Cadburys paper. They'd make a cone out of the paper and fill it up with broken biscuits for a halfpenny. You know you'd also see the man who used to walk round the streets with a barrow - with an apron round him, like a butcher's apron - and you could buy tiger-toffee or any toffee for a halfpenny a bag. It was so nice. And Sunday afternoon about four o'clock you'd hear the man walking along with a bell and a tray on his head shouting 'muffins, muffins muffins'. Or you would see the old man come along with a barrow. And I remember he always had mauve paper and a coconut cut in to sections, a penny or halfpenny a section - that coconut thing was right up to the war. And then you could go out and there was the man with the baked potatoes, he trundled a little barrow and you'd have a lovely big hot baked potatoes with salt and vinegar for a penny.

Z Did you have any close friends at school?

Annie They were all my best friends. There was Sadie Tite, she was an intellectual (I don't know if she's still alive) and she lived in Florestan Street, Mile End Road and I'd go round there on Saturday afternoons or evenings, you'd walk, well, we were young. And then there Susie Weintraub, she was a lovely girl, and her sister Gertie, they lived in a turning off Mile End Road, called Hayward Passage, they lived in Paragon Mansions and they were very poor. And I was friends with them till after school and then they went to live in America, both sisters. Oh yes. And then there was Dora Lerner I got to know, a very pretty girl. She married a boy from our street, and she died in Nottingham a year ago. A lot of them were very poor... we were all poor, we were all more or less in the same boat, we were all poor, but rich in spirit and in everything, in every way. It would have been nice to have a little bit extra but in those days darling you don't work, you don't eat you see. Or you went to the Jewish Board of Guardians and they'd give you a ticket for a bit of food, they tell me ... and that's why my mother always kept her head above water, because my father became ill, very ill - lost his sight, in and out of hospital - in and out - so he couldn't work. So my mother sat and we crocheted at home and made a nice living. Not like now - handouts, more, more, more, now way darling. And my father helped to wind the wools and silks and all that and my mother sold them to Dukes in Aldgate, a great big importers and manufacturers, millionaires they were.

Z So when you left school did you go in to crocheting ?

Annie No. no, no. When I left school my mother took me to, it was then the Jewish Board of Guardians, they found you jobs, you had to sign for three years or so. And I was apprenticed to an artificial florists, because I was very artistic at school. And I didn't like it, I hated it. I was

paid I think 7/6d a week, and I kept about two bob for myself. I didn't like it. It was in Woodstock Road, off Oxford Street and the fare money to the West End was about three or four pence a day. It was too tedious soon put a chopper on that. And I finished up working with my mother, crocheting, made beautiful things. And then after that I went into a workshop in Bedford Street. I went to learn tailoring and that's where I met my husband. I liked it there, if you're happy in a thing you like it don't you - I met my husband going to work, I met him in Commercial Road. The East End was lovely.

Z We've talked about Saturday and shabbas, but what about other festivals Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur?

Annie Oh that was a ritual, very special. My mother would go to schule on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. I remember my mother always coming home to us and saying (2 or 3 words in Yiddish.) That means I'm taking seven drops of water and I'm going (624). Seven drops of water, I don't know what it meant but that's what she did. They'd be the first in schule my parents and the last out. And then the table would be laid lovely.

Z And who would join you at Rosh Hashana would it your immediate family or would relatives and friends.

Annie: No, my mother and father and my family.

Z And what about the Pesach?

Annie: Oh that was a headache before, all the crockery came and what was put in to the very big galvanised bath and would be soaking - I can see it right now. And my father used to walk about with a feather duster you know all over, and we'd look for the Affikomen (*a piece of Matzo that was hidden and children got a reward if they found it*) you know. It was very nice.

Z So, you used to wash all your dishes carefully, so you had the same dishes for Pesach ?

Annie Always put away separately.

Z So you had completely different Pesach dishes ?

Annie Entirely.

Z So whats this about them coming into a galvanised bath ?

Annie My mother used to put them in there so that they would be extra extra extra kosher. That was my mother's way of doing things. Lovely woman she was, lovely. Lovely beautiful woman.

Z And then what happened on Seder Night ?

Annie Oh Seder night was wonderful. Just us. I remember sometimes I would open the door for the angel, you know to come in. And it was what you call a Seder but the only thing was

we were so worn out we were half asleep by one o'clock in the morning. It was lovely. It was what you call a Seder.

Z So most of these events were spent with your immediate family ?

Annie Yes.

Z Did you ever have visitors around to the house ?

Annie My mother had a sister, she was always round our house, always, always, always. My aunt Siffra, lovely lovely lovely lady she was. And my uncle came very very briefly nearly every other day and lived in Commercial Road in Richard St. And my other uncle that had the large tailor shop, he came practically every other shabbas - he used to wear a top hat and a morning suit and he'd walk from and shule all the way from Mile End Road to come to us and then go to his daughter, his eldest daughter Becky. And funnily enough, her daughter, who's my second cousin, comes to our centre, Jimmy Levine

Z What about your adolescence, what did you do when you weren't working ?

Annie Used to go to the cinema, when we had a few coppers to spend - sixpence. Or I'd go with my mother to the Jewish Theatre, the Pavilion, I liked the jewish play you know, the Pavillion was the jewish theatre. We used to get some wonderful prominent actors there.

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Z So the Jewish plays there were all in Yiddish ?

Annie Yes. I remember seeing a play there called (the Dybbuck. And I didn't know what it was, and my mother explained it to me later and then there was another play that we saw. And I was in tears and we went in the gallery you know - threepence each I think it was - always a full house. It was packed and it was lovely, I used to enjoy them. There was one play, which I remember vividly, it really sums it all up, what life is all about. It takes place in a house and in one part of the house there is a very great merriment of a party - and underneath there was a great grief of a death, which sums up life in a house with two families. Laughter and tears, I remember seeing that. And we came out both weeping my mother and I.

Z Did you ever go to music halls ?

Annie No, I liked the cinema very much. When I met my husband, that's when we used to go to the pictures.

Z Did you go in to town much ?

Annie When I got older, sometimes my friend and I would go and our lovely outing would be ... we'd be dressed in a our regalia in our very very best and we'd go to Coventry Street Corner House, gorgeous crystal chandeliers, the lovely atmoshpere and the Nippy waitresses.

Z Lyons tea houses >?

Annie Not Corner Houses, beautiful ... to me they were like a palace. You'd have the beautiful orchestra Albert Sandler playing beautiful music, gorgeous crystal chandeliers, Nippy waitresses and we'd have our special horsd'oeuvres (?order) Saturday night. There'd be a straw basket of batten rolls on the table and a pot of tea and that would come to 2/6d, no six-pence ha'penny I think. I'm not quite sure. And if we saw there was great crowds waiting we'd ask for another pot of tea so we'd extend our sitting there you see. And then if we wanted a knicker bocker glory we'd see how much money we had between us and that was seven-pence. A tall glass with every fruit and ice cream and every kind of a nut in it, that's about one pound fifty now.

Z Did you go to any dance halls ?

Annie Yes, I loved it. It was a different atmosphere my dear, it was wonderful. Jo Loss said - who I know personally, because when we went to the Dorchester every year, he was the resident band leader there - he gave a programme the other day on the radio and he said, 'what a pity they don't bring back the old time ballroom dancing'. I remember at the Astoria the boys and girls were like princes and princesses, dressed up and so many of them met their husbands there on the dance floor. We'd go once a week, on a Saturday night and sometimes if there was a very special spotlight dance we'd get a little bit (?extra from my mother) and we'd go on a Thursday night, but it was normally Saturday night.

Z How much did it cost to go, do you know ?

Annie To go to the Covent Garden which was the most exclusive, when they never had the Covent Garden opera there they used to have dancing there - 1930. 1931. I met my husband coming home from the dance. 3'6d. And it was 'princess' for a night. I'm sorry all that is done away with now.

Z But 3/6d is a lot out of the 7/6d that you got every week.

Annie Well, later I earn't up to 35 shillings which was a lot of money. 35 shillings is equivalent to what now, ten pounds now or more. Every week I liked to have a new little hat, that was 3/6d, then it was a hat and gloves and a bag to match , little pouch bag you know. Everything was so different.

Z So who did you go with ?

Annie My school friend, Sadie, and another girl, she died last year, and we were very very close friends.

Z And when you got to the dance hall there'd be lots of people there ?

Annie Oh lots, we all seemed to know one another. It was a lovely close relationship. I mean the girls that I worked with ... 'Oh hello Anne, hello Miriam ... it was lovely.

Z No, I know you've told us on the tape, about a week or so ago about how you met your husband, did you go out with other men before you met your husband ?

Annie Of course. We'd go for a ride ... on top of a bus. Sit in Hyde Park ... you didn't need a lot of money to enjoy yourself then. We'd go in to Mile End Rd, you had tea or a bun or something, you didn't need to have a lot of money.

Z So this boy you went out with before your husband, how did you meet him ?

Annie Just walking along Whitechapel Road. ... it was a different story darling ... you can't imagine what it was like, how many romances blossomed and marriages from the Whitechapel Rd from going for walks and walks and walks.

Z I know the story of your husband but what about the boy you went out with before your husband ?

Annie I didn't like him, he smelt of fish and chips !

Z How did you meet him.

Annie Walking along Whitechapel Rd ... we all seemed to know one another. And now you could sit in a room and not know anybody.

Z So would he come home to your house ?

Annie Oh yes, of course, of course. There was no such thing as (100). I remember him buying my mother a lovely box of grapes, lovely, all done up.

Z And would your parents pressurise you to get married at all ?

Annie Never, never. They were very interested but they never interfered. There weren't people pressurising you saying 'you've got to get married, you've got to get married'.

Z And how old were you when you did get married ?

Annie Must I tell you, I'm not telling you ...

Z No, OK. I'm just interested because ...

Annie In my twenties.

Z And what about when you went out with boys, did you have to be back by a certain time or ...

Annie No, I used my discretion, there was no such thing as bad thoughts in anybody's mind.

Z You were completely trusted ?

Annie Trustworthy, of course. If I came home my mother would say to me '(124 in Yiddish) and that mean 'where were you?' So I says 'I was talking'.

Z What about between friends, I mean would you talk about your boyfriends ?

Annie Oh yes, yes. Have a good laugh at times. Oh yes.

Z Would you kiss a boy before you married him or not ?

Annie I'm not telling you all my secrets. You tell me all your secrets. It was more or less a cuddle in the pictures, it was nice.

Z It might be a kiss and a cuddle before you got married but no more than that?

Annie Oh it was nice, it was such an open book I can't tell you.

Z Did you ever go out with any non-Jewish boys ?

Annie I never mixed with them, the majority were Jewish. Every one of my friends married a Jewish man.

Z So you got married to your husband and then.

Annie We never had two ha'pennies to rub together, but we had a lovely life. When we got married we moved to Burdett Road, number 241, I remember it right now.

Z And how did you find this place ?

Annie I found it, there were thousands of rooms and houses to let. Not like now - £65,000 , £85,000 , they talk about it as though it was water running under the bridge. Two rooms twelve shillings a week. And we were so happy. It was lovely. The girls, I used to work with, like Evelyn, used to come up and see me - it was so lovely, all nice and beautiful, not now I don't think. Not like now. I don't like the people and I don't like the way of life.

Z We are talking about what the way of life was like and you moved to Burdett Road and what did you do, were you still working ?

Annie Yes. My husband found it very hard, he used to go to the cattle market with his parents you know. And I worked opposite, as I told you. I was taught tailoring and then the war broke out. And that was it. And my husband was called up and it put a stop to everything. Our house was blown up to bits and pieces.

Z Where were you living then during the second world war ?

Annie Baldock, Hertfordshire.

Z That must have been a shock, from the Jewish east end where everybody was Jewish ...

Annie Oh I can't tell you, you have no idea. Yet we integrated very well and people that we stayed with called Mrs Buckingham, oh she was marvellous, she didn't want us to go. When my husband came home on leave he was made most welcome. And my father was already dead. Everybody was in the same boat, billeted, it was dreadful. Don't remind me of those

days, it was terrible. I wish I'd stayed where I was, I could have bought a little house there in Letchworth for two hundred pounds. It was called the first Garden City but now my nephew, when he has to drive through there for business, says'; Auntie, its not the same as you'd think, it's all built up ...'.

Z so where did you move to ?

Annie We moved to Clapton. Clapton E5, it wasn't the East End anymore. And it wasn't like it was any more.

Z And were there Jews living round there ?

Annie And a lot of nice, very nice gentile people. Nine out of ten were Jews and then in 1946 the exodus started - moving afield to Golders Green or Mill Hill or wherever. It wasn't the same.

Z How did it change ?

Annie I don't think I've been back three times. Well you know you go to a function and know right away from the atmosphere that you were going to enjoy yourself. Well, it had stopped dead, you understand what I mean? In the East End, some had a few more shillings than the other, but there was a great sharing and a great trust between people and I think people were much more genuine and people were more caring. And I'm certain there was always violence, but I would still stress again that there was never as much violence as today with the muggings and the murders and bolting yourself up like Fort Knox. And that is a change of life.

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