

**Interviewee: Jean Gordon**

**Interviewer: Malin Lundin**

**Date: 04.08.2012**

Interviewer: Ok. This is an interview with Jean Gordon and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. The date is 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2012. Jean, would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Jean: Yes, I can. It's one of the things that I can remember, September 1926.

Interviewer: And where were you born?

Jean: I was born at number 14 Albion Road, Hounslow, Middlesex.

Interviewer: So how old were you when the war broke out then in 1939?

Jean: In 1939 when war was declared I was only twelve but by 7 September I was thirteen. So just after the war was declared.

Interviewer: So whereabouts were you living when the war broke out?

Jean: Well, when war broke out [coughs], excuse me, I was on holiday with my mother and my grandmother because my mother rented a flat in Ramsgate, Kent, in Albion Place and she would, she always then, did rent houses wherever we lived and the flat was a very nice first floor flat. Albion Place, just a few doors down from where Queen Victoria used to stay.

Interviewer: Can you remember the day that war was declared, on 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1939?

Jean: Well, the most vividest things that I do remember was that there was a lot of preparations for what was to be expected and my mother, who was the great organiser, and my grandmother, who was quite elderly then, was very nervous and I think I would have had this sort of degree of, oh what's it all about, you see. But the most vivid memory was on the night of the day that war was declared we had gone to bed but then the air raid siren went off. I was quite familiar with that because they'd had several runs of playing it over so that people knew. My mother said 'Come on quick. Out of bed! Get dressed! We must go to the air raid shelter.' Now the air raid shelter in Ramsgate then was, we had to go down some steps and then along the seafront to, what was then, the railway station and the tunnels that came under the cliffs were where you went for air raid shelter. They subsequently closed off but there's no longer a railway there. But those tunnels, I believe, can be looked at. Anyway, I got up and got dressed quickly and my grandmother, as I say, was older and my mother kept saying to her, 'Come on. Come on. Hurry up mum'. My grandmother was saying, 'But I haven't done me hair yet'. She always went out with her hair, each side she would plait into a ring around each ear and that was the fashion from way back but she still did it. My mother got so crossed. Anyway, by the time we would have been ready to go out the all-clear sounded and whatever happened it was a total false alarm [laughs].

Interviewer: How did you feel when the siren went on the first day of the war?

Jean: I don't know. I mean, I would say that whenever there was a sound of anything like that my, to this day, my tummy would churn. So I suspect that initially I thought, oh my goodness. My mum's concern and agitation I would have take onboard as well. But I was only determined to do whatever I was asked to do. I was going to be a good girl.

Interviewer Were you still at school at this time?

Jean: Well, this was during the summer holidays, you see, and at the time<sup>1</sup> we were living in Chatham and I was at Fort Pitt Day Technical School for Girls but because once war was declared the school was evacuated down to Wales. My mother didn't want me to go to be evacuated away so I was there with her in Ramsgate and she decided to stay in Ramsgate and that I would go to St George's School, which I then did. I think she must have actually made some sort of provision or arrangement for that to be feasible.

Interviewer: Do you remember why your mother didn't want you to be evacuated with the other children?

Jean: Well, yes, because I was an only child ad my father was away in the Royal Navy actually based at, what was called, the China Station. He was away for many years then. My mother, I think, she – me being an only child she probably felt that I would be very, very unhappy with strange people. But who knows? But not all of the school pupils did evacuate to – oh, I think it was Swansea in Wales. I'm not hundred per cent sure where. So I just didn't go because my mum didn't want me to go. I think if she'd said 'You must go', I would have tried but I was – being an only child I was quite – a bit shy probably.

Interviewer: So you say your father served in the Navy?

Jean: Yes, yes. He had joined the Royal Navy when he was quite young and he was away at sea quite a bit.

Interviewer: When you became aware that war was going to – to break out were you – how did you feel about the fact that he was serving in the Navy when you knew that war was going to –

Jean: Well, you see. I don't think I did have any real understanding of what war being declared actually entailed. All I knew was we were at war against Germany but I couldn't understand at that time. I was used to my dad being away at sea. Obviously, at times, enjoying his – he was in India a lot and it would have been nice and when he came home he would bring us presents from whichever country. To this day I've got things that came from him, this table lamp thing, many things. I took all

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<sup>1</sup> 5 min

that for granted that it was nothing unusual for him not to be there. All I knew was that I had to try to do whatever it was my mum wanted me to do.

Interviewer: So how long were you at school for?

Jean: Well, what happened was I was only at Ramsgate School for that one term because then the Fort Pitt Day Technical School for Girls they actually moved back and joined Sittingbourne Grammar School for Girls. So what happened was we were able to rent a house in Sittingbourne and I went, I think it would have been after the Christmas holiday, went there to school. Then by the following September the school, which would have been 1940, the school moved back to Fort Pitt completely. We rented in, again, in Chatham. So I was back with my friends and it was lovely to be back.

Interviewer: In what ways during the early years of the war – how did the war affect you during the early years of the war?

Jean: Well, I mean, they affected everybody to a degree of having rationing<sup>2</sup>, certain foods weren't available and I think once we moved back to Chatham it was the case that you grew your own vegetables. My mother would have me digging, as we say 'digging for victory'. I do know that because my mother, her job was mainly in catering, but she was a cook supervisor at Rochester Grammar School during a lot of that time. One of the stories that she would share was that they had their lard, was rationed, lard being the fat, and it was provided in a wooden case in those days. It enabled her to make very nice pastry. Anyway, she had the food inspector came to the school and she hadn't declared the case of lard that she had managed to store and keep so that she could make really nice, whatever it was going to be. She sat on that case whilst the inspector was there asking her questions [laughs] that she told me. These were the sort of stories that your mums and your dads and your grandmothers told you. That was what the entertainment of them was so that's why I had these particular memories like that. But then if you go on to the – the whole of the war clothes rationing, you see, you made do and mend and you didn't go out and buy clothes and you didn't have anything like you have – one pair of shoes [laughs]. It to me then, in those days, that was quite normal. It was ok. So I think you will find that people my generation when they were younger just accepted things more readily.

Interviewer: Were you affected by the bombing once it started?

Jean: Well, the thing was we were in Chatham and what happened, every or most houses, in their back gardens, had an Anderson air raid shelter which was a deep digging, it was dug out of the ground and it had steps that went down and then over the top was this galvanised roof thing. We had, where we were, in the garden was the Anderson shelter and we had two camp beds, one on each side having gone down the steps. You would have the sirens going off but in actual fact Chatham where we were, I have no recollections of actual bombing. There might well have been some over the

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<sup>2</sup> 10 min

dockyard, I have no, honestly, no idea. But I know that my mother would say, come on we're going to sleep in the shelter anyway rather than have to get up in the middle of the night because the air raid sirens went off but what happened was the planes flew over Chatham coming up to London, you see. So the Medway towns, they were bypassed, a lot of them. We would sleep in the shelter and one of my stories I can tell you that I can clearly remember. My mum had washed my hair for me and had, what she called, 'set it' to make the waves and things. Then when I went to sleep at night I put, what was called a hairnet, a brown hairnet over my hair, and I was tossing and turning and going to sleep. All of a sudden I sat up to try to shake my pillow up and I screamed and my mother woke up, 'What's the matter?' 'There's a great big spider on my pillow'. She said, 'Wait a minute, I'll light the candle' cos we had to have – we didn't have a torch even. So there she was she lit the candle, held it up on a candlestick<sup>3</sup> and there on the pillow, she said, 'You silly thing, it's your hairnet!' [laughs]. But I was in an absolute – I was, oh, absolutely terrified of the spider, let alone the [laughs]. That's one of my very vivid memories of sleeping in the Anderson shelter. But all of that bombing did go on, you see, in London and the suburbs of London. Certain parts of us might have had the occasional bomb, but I have no recollections of anything like that.

Interviewer: So what was your experience of sleeping in the air raid shelter then?

Jean: Well, as I say, doing it only for – I don't remember always having to do it but I think it was in the initial stages of the Germans flying and bombing during the Blitz. I didn't like it. It was cold, it was damp, there were insects. I, by this time, was beginning to resist some of my mum's, well, you must do so and so. If I said, 'No, I'm not going to', again, one particular thing I can remember. She was – we were breeding chickens partly for the eggs and also we could – she would – for the first time somebody had shown her how to kill a chicken by ringing its neck. Then I was supposed to help pull the feathers out and eventually we would have a roast chicken, you see. But anyway, the sorts of things she wanted me to do the first time she'd killed the chicken and was – had me doing all this and then we were going to have roast chicken and I said, 'I'm not eating chicken'. 'What do you mean?!', 'No, no, you killed it'. 'Don't you be like that, just you wait until your father comes home' and she really, really had a go at me. I can't honestly say, I can't remember whether I had a small piece of this chicken or not when it was roasted. But it hasn't put me off eating roast chicken today [laughs]. Yes, so all of these associations with what would have been considered the worst time of the war. They took so many aspects of our lives. We learnt to – I think it made us, all of us, that much stronger, really.

Interviewer: Did the war affect your schooling at all then?

Jean: Well, I would have thought perhaps it would have done but I happen to have my school reports from the autumn term of '38, spring term of '39, so that's leading up to the war. Then there's a gap from the summer '39 goes to the spring of 1940. But that was when I was back at school. As far as

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<sup>3</sup> 15 min

I'm aware right up until I left in 1942, at the end of the summer term, when I was fifteen and ten months, I mean, I had very good, good reports really. They didn't make any reference to the war. I had extra duties at school apparently because it said I performed extra duties capably. 'Her conduct has been good'. So I was wanting to be very cooperative definitely.

Interviewer: Do you remember what those extra duties were? Were they related to the war?

Jean: Well, I think they might have been because – but what they were specifically I'm not a hundred per cent. It was a case of – we actually had to help support other pupils, you know, who might have suddenly had to<sup>4</sup> come to school. I'm not really a hundred per cent; my memory wouldn't be clear on that.

Interviewer: Did you still do full days at school?

Jean: Full days? Yeah, I seem to remember we would have been there by nine o'clock and then left quite early in the afternoon. Well, I say early, probably about half past three something like that, four. But I was always able to walk home, you know, I didn't have very far to go.

Interviewer: Were they preparing you for the war while you were at school?

Jean: I don't recall that we had a great deal of update. You see, the thing was that the – we only had radio, we didn't have television and you didn't play the radio very much. There were some limited newspapers published. But I don't remember my mother – she used to have the *News of the World* on a Sunday. But I wasn't encouraged to even read a newspaper. I read books and that was all, really. Yeah, cos I was librarian at school, that was probably one of my extra duties that they referred to. So things were just so different that you were kept, as I would say, you were kept in the dark. You weren't fully made aware of what was happening. I think the most memorable thing that I can remember was that my mother had been notified by the Admiralty that my father's ship, the HMS Cornwall, that he was on, had been sunk in the Indian Ocean and that there'd been a considerable loss of lives. But that a certain percentage, I can't tell you off hand now, had been rescued. But until they had news they couldn't give us any information. She had to, I went with her, every week we walked to the telephone box, which was outside the Town Hall in Chatham. She would put two old pennies in the machine and she had – then you got the operator and she had the telephone number for the Admiralty which was based in Bath in Somerset. She would – because it was only a small telephone box, she'd say to me wait outside and when she came out she would just be shaking her head. She just said, 'No news. No news'. This went on for six weeks until she came out off the telephone kiosk tears welling in her eyes, hugged me. But I knew that he was alright. It wasn't that he was dead because – then she was able to – she was choked. She was able to say, 'He's alright'. They'd been taken to South Africa.

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Interviewer: Do you recall your feelings around the time when you heard that your father's ship had been sunk?

Jean: Again, I had, somehow or rather I was very, I think the word would be stoic, because of how I'd been brought up. Not to be one to be always crying and miserable and unhappy. But I think I was as much concerned for my mum's concern. Because my dad was away such a lot I was very shy when he was around and I didn't have this real<sup>5</sup> father/daughter with him. Well, I did eventually once he was out of the Navy but prior to that it didn't enable me to be close to him. So I think I was more like my mum, just kept soldiering on. Didn't have these very strong emotions or if I did, I didn't accept them. So it was just always a relief that I knew that he was ok. But then it was quite a while before he got home again, you see. And that is something that I don't vividly remember. It was as though we were back – he was back from having been away as he had been in the past. Coming up to years but on this occasion it was three years before he came home.

Interviewer: What year of the war was it that your father's ship was sunk?

Jean: Ah, I knew that you'd ask me that and I should have them handy to hand because – can you –

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. We can pause.

[Recorded paused]

Jean: Yeah.

Interviewer: So your father returned back after the ship was sunk?

Jean: Yes, and he had been very well looked after by this family in South Africa, Durban. For many years he was in touch with them. Sadly I no longer have, you know, to know where – who they were. But it was very good that a lot of the families took the sailors in with their homes.

Interviewer: So did your father join – or go back to another ship after he was –

Jean: Yes, yes. He was then on HMS Uganda and he then went again to the Mediterranean, this was during the war. It was when they were off Italy that he – the ship was torpedoed and the – my dad gave instructions for the bulkheads to be closed, although they had to come through via, obviously, the captain or somebody. But of him taking the security measures it saved the Uganda from sinking and subsequently he was awarded a distinguished service medal for that, yeah. Then the ship was, the Uganda, was just about managed to be accompanied and taken across to America, Charleston, where it was repaired. He then came back. I think they were shipped back but I'm not quite sure how they got back. But it was interesting that they arrived in Charleston in November 1943 and they were

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<sup>5</sup> 25 min

– the ship was repaired. Then it didn't go back to the Royal Navy. It went to the Royal Canadian Navy. It's quite an interesting story, you know, attached to that, really.

Interviewer: So what happened after you finished school in 1942 then? Did you start working?

Jean: Yes, I had – because I had studied shorthand typewriting and book keeping, that is where I knew I would use my skills and I had applied for this job at a solicitor's office in Railway Street, Chatham. I started on the Saturday, believe it or not, and I went to work there but I'd also<sup>6</sup> had an interview with an Estate Agent across the road from this solicitors. They had then written me and offered me a much more interesting job. So I had to tell the solicitors that I wasn't going to be coming back to work the following week. I was actually, as I say, going to be working in the Estate Agent and that's where I was for, well, a considerable number of years, really. Yeah.

Interviewer: Were you ever called up during the war?

Jean: No, I wouldn't have been really old enough. I was sixteen when I left school but I think calling up was a limited number of women were actually called up but certain age groups that didn't have other full-time jobs, you see, yes. I don't know though that – I suppose over the years I had met people who said, 'Oh, well I was called up and served in the Wrens' or whatever. But that was at the time something that I wouldn't even had been aware about – aware of, you know.

Interviewer: So were you ever interested in kind of taking part of the war effort and joining the Land Army or –

Jean: No, I think my bit that my mum encouraged me was to help to grow vegetables, help her with the garden. The other aspect, too, during that time but not only we would have done it whether there was a war or no war, was that you also made your own clothes and you knitted. So I did all of those sort of extra things that probably I might – I wouldn't have done in this day and age, you see. So, yeah, that's where it was.

Interviewer: How was it growing up during the war? Cos you were twelve when the war started and then having your teenage years during the war, do you feel that – that the war affected the way that –

Jean: Well, certainly I know that as an only child I was, what I would normally say was quite shy. And you weren't able to socialise in the ways that we are – can do today. Once you came out at school, you were home and you stayed at home. If you had friends you – as I had some school friends – although they didn't necessary all live right near to me. Although we went to the same school, they came quite a distance to get to the school. I was always lucky that I was very close to it. But I do remember being able to visit where they lived, their houses, perhaps for birthdays or something so it was really a special occasion. Yes, so that's the only – I think my other memories of visiting were going to stay with my grandmother and my aunt in Hounslow, where I was born and where,

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<sup>6</sup> 30 min

incidentally, my mother was born as well. We would go there, occasionally, to stay and be able to just go out and about a bit. But that was again, special, or something that was special. Not a regular thing. Then when I got older and started work and then, I'm talking now after the war had ended, it probably would have been when I was – I was fifteen when I left school so it would have been me fifteen coming up – sixteen. But I was down in Ramsgate, where we were renting<sup>7</sup> a house, and I remember meeting or walking along and there was some American soldiers must have come behind. I can't think whether I was with a friend or not but I must have been really. They started to talk to us and said, 'Have a cigarette' or I can't remember how they would have said it. I can't remember now but they were the classic American cigarettes and so I took one and said, 'Ok, I'll have a puff' and I did. That was my first and they're very strong, these cigarettes, and that was the first time I ever had a cigarette. Fortunately, I can say that I probably could count on the fingers on both hands the numbers of cigarettes I smoked after that over the years. But the – how can I put this – the American army they, obviously, all of them were very charming, you see, with the young ladies [laughs]. That was quite a memory that I have that – yeah. So, then it was just how things were changing after the war had ended.

Interviewer: So do you remember the end of the war?

Interviewer: I would lie if I said, 'Oh, yes, I do – I do' because – but I do know that my dad was still away, where ever he was at that time, and we were back in Chatham. I can only think that it'd probably been on one of those occasions when we'd gone to Hounslow to be with my grandmother and aunt and that – in fact I can remember vaguely now cos it was neighbours who were bringing along plates with all homemade cakes and things and exchanged it. So, you just sort of had a few sort of get-togethers and that was how we celebrated. But it was, I mean, again, no television. Radio, yes, but the radio receptions weren't very good. I mean, I can't remember that. All I remember was that my grandmother had, well, old fashioned gramophone as it was called with the – and you played a record. She also, my grandmother, had a piano so I had learnt to play the piano, a bit anyway, not today I can't play. There was that sense of relief. Neighbours, as I say, celebrated probably, yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So what did you do for entertainment during the war then?

Jean: Well, the entertainment during the war wasn't quite the same as – we did go to the, as we would say, we went to the pictures. And to go to the pictures was a fantastic treat. It would only cost either thrupence or sixpence for a seat and you'd go. My mother, occasionally, would take me. But that was probably what I occasionally was able to do when I was older with one of my school friends, you see. You didn't go out very late at night in the dark because, I mean, there weren't any streetlights, you see, because of the war. So you only went mainly to matinees, in my case, unless it was summertime and I would go with my mother. So that was a – what I called – a special treat, you didn't do it every week. But you did get to go. Also, the other thing, yes, that I clearly remember was

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<sup>7</sup> 35 min

going to the theatre. You would go and see live entertainment and quite – people that I can't just at<sup>8</sup> the moment remember names – but they would have become quite famous entertainers and, obviously, long since passed away. But to be able to go to Chatham Empire, as it was called, to see live shows was amazing. So that was the sort of entertainment that we had. In your own home you would play a record, if you had a gramophone, and if you had a piano you'd go and tinkle with the piano. I could read music and I did learn to play to some extent. But that would have been about it. Reading a lot. Reading loads of books in those days.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to any dances with soldiers?

Jean: Well, this was after the war. After the war when I was that age, fifteen/sixteen, I was able to go to dances in, but not in Chatham I don't recall, I think we did go – it was Rochester, there was a ballroom there. Some of us from school, yeah, we went occasionally to Rochester. But then, it was subsequently, after the war we moved down to Ramsgate where my mum and dad had by this time bought a house cos he'd come out of the Navy. I did use to go regularly to dances then, over quite a number of years. It was at a dance that I met my, now, late husband, Rex. So that was really where lots of people in those years after the war as well as during the war, they made their – met their partners at dances, you see, and ended up getting married. So, yes, that's where the things are so different that how they are today with all the various television and stuff that's all – let alone the mobile phones with all these technical things [laughs].

Interviewer: So if you could summarise your wartime experience in a few sentences how would you summarise it?

Jean: Well, Jean probably, I would say, Jean became Jean when she was fifty but in actual fact Jean became Jean, I'm pretty sure, to some extent because her father was away for long periods of time. Her mother was very strong and stout, ran the ship at home whilst my dad was not there. I learnt also that you had a, what they called the stiff upper lip. With all of that that's how I, without realising at the time, but that's how I developed to being very strong and very positive, I like to think. Because so many of the traits that I inherited from my mother, one of my daughters, my youngest daughter, she is classically like my mother was, runs the show, and her husband accepts that. They have two daughters so they're very, very good and got very important jobs. So, it is the influence of the family but then the circumstances that were there during that Second World War also influenced how the family was which in turn influenced me. To be, as I say, with the stiff upper lip, to accept whatever life throws at me really.

Interviewer: Ok. Is there anything that you want to talk about that we haven't had a chance to talk about today?

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<sup>8</sup> 40 min

Jean: Oh, I don't know. There's been lots of memoires of, as I say, with my – when my dad did get home I was able<sup>9</sup> to get to enjoy his company. After being awarded the distinguished service medal, helping to save the HMS Uganda from sinking, we went to Buckingham Palace where the Queen's father, King George VI, he presented my dad with his distinguished service medal. Although I do have a photograph outside Buckingham Palace, I can't find it because I think I've given it to one of my other daughters actually, who may have it. But that was a very memorable and proud occasion for me.

Interviewer: Was this during the war or was it afterwards?

Jean: No, it was during the war, yeah. Well, yes it was. Just before the war ended.

Interviewer: And how did you feel going into Buckingham Palace to see your father?

Jean: I think I was in awe. I was awestruck [laughs]. Yeah. It was amazing.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much. I'm going to turn this off.

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<sup>9</sup> 45 min