An Interview with Ruth Maxwell

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Conducted by Nadine Muller

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer
R = Respondent / Interviewee
[ ] = Clarification note

I : So today is the 8th of May 2017. Can you tell me your full name, and your age, and where you live?

R: My name's Ruth Maxwell, I'm getting on for 71, and I live in Hampstead, London.

I: Thank you, Ruth. Ruth, you're the daughter of a war widow. Can you tell us the name of your mother?

R: My mum was called Joyce Mary Maxwell.

I: And can you tell us a bit about your mum's early life?

R: Sure. She was born in 1924, in this part of London as well. We've always lived here. She was the youngest of five children. Her parents were George and Ann Hawkins, and my grandfather worked in a firm of accountants in the City. And my grandmother, who had been born illegitimate, made a very good choice when she married him because she was always very ashamed of being illegitimate, as you can imagine, in Victorian times. They made a good life. They were comfortably off, they had these five children, of whom Joyce was the youngest, and she grew up as a happy child. She was very bright. She was particularly fond of her nearest sibling, who was called Ronnie. He was four years older, and she and Ron were very, very close indeed.

She was sent to a local convent near Belsize Park, where she excelled. She was always very interested in English and history, [which] were her main areas of interest. And she loved going on Hampstead Heath. She was always very interested in nature, and she loved animals. So, she was a good, all-round pupil at school, and she won a scholarship to a grammar school in Euston, called St Aloysius, which was very selective. And she stayed there until she was fifteen. Unfortunately, the war broke out and school was evacuated to Northampton. But my grandmother would not let her go. She was very possessive of my mum. The others had all grown up and gone to work but my mum was left at home, and Granny didn't want her to leave. Which was a terrible disappointment to her because her plan was to go to university and study history, get a degree.

So, reluctantly … well, she had no choice, really … she stayed at home and Granny found a local woman who was a shorthand-typist, who lived down the road. And she sent

Mum down the road to this woman, who taught her secretarial skills – shorthand, typing, and all the rest of it, which she took to like a duck to water, actually.

Then, as soon as she could – I suppose she must have been about sixteen or seventeen – she got a job in the Civil Service with various war offices, the War Office, I think it was, where she became part of a pool of typists who … they were kind of mobile. She was sent around from one office to another, typing up war documents and top-secret stuff, I suppose, down in Whitehall, and various other places like that. And she always said that it was really creepy, she often had to work on a Saturday. And she said it was dark and damp and smelly, and there were rats and sandbags, and it wasn't nice at all. And then she had quite a long journey home on a bus, probably in an air-raid from time to time, to get back to Hampstead.

And, in the end, she became ill. I'm not actually sure what she had but she was diagnosed with pleurisy definitely, and possibly TB. But wartime conditions were very difficult; there was the blackout, food was rationed, they had to spend quite a lot of time in the cellar, I think, during air-raids. And, I suppose, her immune system got pretty battered, and what with all this heavy, you know, this work she was doing down in Whitehall and in various offices around London, and getting home late, her health suffered. She ended up being sent to a hospital out in Berkshire, and it's called Ashridge. Now, Ashridge is the most beautiful country pile set in the Downs in Berkshire.[1] It was requisitioned by the government, actually, initially for people who'd been bombed out in London and in cities, who had been injured or who had become ill, or had nervous breakdowns, or whatever, as a recuperation and convalescence place. And for anyone else who, like mum, had got a, you know, a chest infection or chest complaint, or pleurisy or TB, or any of those things, pneumonia.

So, Mum was sent off there, into the wilds, to this absolutely beautiful country house. It was an estate with huge grounds. And then there were extra outdoor wards, where she spent quite a long time having what they called that 'fresh air treatment'. There were no antibiotics. I think antibiotics were discovered during the war, but I don't think they were freely available when she had this dreadful, dreadful chest infection. Plus the fact, she caught hepatitis from one of the doctors. The doctor died and Mum was at death's door. And I remember, she told us her parents were called up to the hospital in the middle of the night, possibly because she was going to die.

But anyway, she was a hell of a fighter and she recuperated from, recovered from the hepatitis, and from the pleurisy, TB [Tuberculosis], having spent six months sleeping on a veranda in the open air, which was the treatment for it in those days – open air! So, she was on the veranda of a hospital ward, along with lots of other people with chest ailments, for six months, in the winter and everything. And she did recover. But she was young, and she was strong.

I: How old was she then, Ruth?

R: She would have been 20-ish, I would imagine, around 20. Well, this would have been in 1944 because between 1944 and 1945 my father was a prisoner of war, well, for longer than that. He was captured in North Africa, by the Italians, actually, at Tobruk. And then he was imprisoned in Italy for quite a while. Then, when Italy was liberated by the Americans and British, instead of giving orders to the POWs [prisoners of war] to get out, they told them to stay put. Whereupon, the Germans quickly invaded Italy and took over all the POWs that the Italians had been imprisoning, and carted them all off to Poland in a cattle truck. So he ended up, when he could probably have escaped in Italy, going to

[1] Respondent correction: Ashridge is set in the Chiltern Hills, not the Downs.

Poland. Which, I believe, was a very well-known route for prisoners of war who were caught up in the North African campaign. So he spent a couple of years in a POW camp in Poland, not far from Krakow and not far from Auschwitz, in fact, where life was extremely brutal and harsh.

Then, in the winter of '44/ '45, the Germans told the prisoners that they must get ready to mobilise at any minute. So this would be, say, December '44. But they were not told what was going to happen to them. So, at some point in December '44, the prisoners were all mobilised and marshalled together and marched out of the camp, in one of the bitterest winters for years and years in central Europe, I suppose. They didn't know where they were going, and they really only had the clothes that they stood up in. And their guards didn't really know where they were going, either. In fact, there's a film based on it, called 'The Long March to Freedom', I don't know whether you've seen it, but it's very good. A lot of those men, who are probably dead now, were interviewed.

They marched them across Europe with no supplies, no food, nothing to drink. The men dropped dead on the spot, or they were shot, or they just collapsed and they were left. They had to dig up root vegetables, if they could even, you know, manage to dig [them] up from the soil that was frozen hard. They slept in barns, in fields, wherever the Germans told them they had to spend the night. And they were infested with lice, they had dysentery. Half of them died en-route. They'll never really know how many people died en-route. They met up with other groups of refugees and Jewish people, who were being marched out of concentration camps. You know, there were huge lines of people marching across Europe at that time. And very often, well, not often, but they were strafed by the RAF, who didn't know who they were. They just thought they were lines of German troops. So some of them died because they were shot by machine gun fire from aeroplanes. It was hell.

And eventually, when the Germans surrendered in the Spring of 1945, he and whoever else was alive were liberated by the Americans, I think, and taken to camps and cleaned up, deloused, and repatriated to this country.

Anyway, Dad ended up in this Ashridge Hospital; because there were so many of these POWs being rescued, they had to find places to put them. So, although it was a civilian hospital, for a while it became a military hospital for repatriated POWs. So all the time my mum and my dad were in this hospital together but I don't think they actually fraternised, you know, the troops wouldn't fraternise with the civilians. Until, sometime, now I'm not quite sure about this, there was a celebration to mark the end of the war. And anyone in the hospital, be they civilian or military, as long as they could get out of bed and walk, was invited to this dance, in this fabulous ballroom. I've visited Ashridge so I've seen it; it's absolutely spectacular. It's a business centre now, but it really is a beautiful place, this massive ballroom.

And I guess that's where they first met, at this ball or this celebration, and they hit it off straightaway. But mum, who was now better, was fed up with being incarcerated in this place, and she decided, maybe against the hospital's advice, I don't know, that she was going to discharge herself and go home because she'd been there for a long time and she felt well, and she was bored, I suppose. So, despite the fact that she had met my dad, it was only, you know, sort of the first seeds of romance that had been sown. And I guess, also, that she never left him any of her details.

Now, I'm going to digress here a bit because we had no idea, until I was in my 50s, that Mum had this bunch of letters that they had written to each other – had absolutely no idea that she had these letters. She kept them all those years. And they are very, very interesting because they map out their courtship, which was very, very rapid, actually.

What happened was that my father died in 1950, and he had very few possessions because (a) he'd been in the Army since 1932, I think; he was a regular soldier. And (b) my dad and his siblings had been born in India, they were Anglo-Indian, which is something else I discovered fairly recently by doing research into my father's side of the family, of which I knew absolutely nothing. Dad had been orphaned in India when he was about nine, and sent to a Baptist missionary orphanage in Orissa, which is below Calcutta, on the eastern side of India.

For some unknown reason, although he had a fairly big family, I guess, on both sides of the family, nobody seemed to want him and his two sisters. They were bunged into this orphanage, and there he stayed until he was a young man. He left school at eighteen with various education qualifications. One of his sisters had died in the orphanage, and his other sister remained in the orphanage and eventually married.

So, Dad, when he was demobbed, he probably just about had the clothes he stood up in. And Mum had a little box, which I have, actually, in the cupboard, of bits and bobs that belonged to him. And that was all she had after he died, apart from his clothes. So, there was this bunch of letters that they had written in-between Mum leaving the hospital, discharging herself and going home, and Dad being discharged from hospital and then going back into the Army. He was stationed at a military camp somewhere, I think, in Oxford or Newbury, or somewhere.

Anyway, we came by these letters quite accidentally when my father's sister, who'd come to live in England in the 1960s with her husband, decided … . I think that her husband had got into trouble in Calcutta. He was a customs officer. He was very shady and not very nice. And I think they had to get out of India fast, so they came here. And she lived a long way away from us. She lived in Essex. No, Suffolk. She had nothing to do with us, although we were her only blood relatives, her two nieces and my brother, her nephew. And she and Mum kept in touch by letter, but she only came to visit us once. Of course, she would have been a mine of information. I would have loved to have talked to her about India and about what had happened. But, of course, you know, you don't want to do these things until you're much older, by which time she was dead.

So, when we got the news that Florence (that was her name) had died, my sister and I said, "I wonder if she's got any belongings of Dad. Any photographs, any letters," you know. "Did she bring them from India? And we'd love … We have so little of our father's, we'd love to know". So Jean and I decided to go to Suffolk to see if we could retrieve anything from her husband, who, by that time, was sort of, well, he was a bit demented, and he was an alcoholic. So we had no luck there, and we came home empty-handed.

And then Mum said, "Oh, I feel terrible. You've gone all the way up there, and you've come back with nothing". Because the house, I can't tell you how ghastly it was. It was like a bomb had gone off in it. So, she [my mother] said, "Look," she said, "I just feel I should let you know this, and I'm going to give you these now", she said. "I was going to ask for them to be cremated with me, but I want you to have them". And she produced this wad of letters which documented their entire courtship, from the end of their stay in hospital to their preparations for marriage, which was only a few months, anyway.

The first letter was from my father to her, and because he didn't know where she lived, he'd sent it to "care of the hospital" and asked them to forward it. And it just said, "I really enjoyed our time at the hospital. I expect you're going to be very surprised when you get this letter but I'd really like to meet up in London when I'm on my next leave. Would you like to meet for a drink?" The post must have been marvellous in those days because it was literally every couple of days [that] these letters were going backwards and forwards. My mother said, "Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather", which was one

of her favourite expressions. “I don’t know what to say, but, yes, I would like to meet you”. And so they arranged to meet.

These letters went on and on for several months, during which my father was taken back into hospital because he was only going in for a minor operation, very minor, to have something, a wart or something, removed. Something, you know, not important. While he was in there, they did a lot of tests on him, and in those days, of course, they wouldn’t tell you what they were doing. They kept testing his urine all the time, he said, “They won't let me out because they keep testing my urine all the time”. I guess they’d found protein or albumen in it, and they were trying to find out what was wrong.

So, by that time, he’d asked her to marry him,[2] not by letter, or if he did, that’s not there, that particular letter, and they agreed they were going to get married as soon as he could get out of the hospital. So Mum had to do all the arrangements for the marriage and also go up and visit him in this military hospital in Oxford. And it must have been quite something, you know, post-war trains and she was working, and she was having to arrange for a flat. Plus, the furniture, there's all sorts of stuff about furniture in [the letters], and pricing of furniture. It was all utility furniture in those days. And then she had to go to see the priest and arrange everything. And he [dad] wrote in one of his letters, “Oh, I feel such a heel. You're doing all this running around and here am I stuck in the hospital, and I can't do anything”.

It seemed to me that, quite suddenly, he was discharged. Because one of the letters says, “Oh, I can't wait to come to London and then we can go and buy the ring, and we’ll be together”. Now, reading between the lines, Jean and I, my sister, decided that they realised he had something possibly fatal, but they weren’t telling him. I think that, in those days, if you had a fatal illness they would probably discharge you and not tell you that maybe you only had a few years to live. That’s my perception. So, I think that, at the end of the day, they didn’t really know what was wrong with him, and they certainly didn’t tell either my father or my mother. He was just discharged and he could get on with getting married and setting up a home, and all the things he wanted to do. Because, obviously, as a child and a young man, for most of his adult life, he hadn't had any of that. So that’s what they did. And they married on December 26th 1945, having met in the spring of 1945. So it was all very sudden.

I: How old was your father then?

R: Dad? He was quite a lot older than mum. He was fourteen years older than mum. So Mum would have been 21, something like that. He was in his mid-30s when they married.

I: And what was his full name?

R: William Edward Maxwell.

I: So, they met in hospital, in the countryside. One, your dad because of the direct, pretty traumatic impact of the war –

R: Yes, yes.

I: And your mother because of the more, I suppose, indirect impact of the war–

R: Yes, correct, yes. Yes, that’s right.

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[2] See Fig. 2.

I: So, they got married at the very end of 1945. At the end of the war –

R: Boxing Day, yes.

I: Ah, right. Okay, Boxing Day of 1945. And tell me how it went from there …

R: Well, first of all they lived in Peabody Buildings. It's off Drury Lane. Dad had two elderly aunts. They'd been born in India. My family on his side goes back a very long way … until at least 1805, I haven't got any further back than that … The two aunts, Alice and Leah, were his aunts, so were his sister's [mother's] two older sisters. They had married military men in their late teens in India and eventually come to live in England. And they were his only relatives, apart from his sister in India, in Calcutta.

Well, they were absolutely lovely, these two old aunts. They were widows, the pair of them, and they lived in a little tiny flat in this Peabody Buildings. They must have managed to help him get a flat in the same block, or nearby. We subsequently visited them when we were little and we were fascinated by them because they were very quaint. They were like two maiden aunts, two old spinsters, who, in fact, had both been married to soldiers. But they both had very strong Indian accents. And we were fascinated by these accents. They were very lilting and sing-song.

I don't think Mum realised – because she was very, very deaf; my mother was profoundly deaf – that … I don't think she would have recognised this Indian accent. But we, as children, thought it was hilarious, you know. We were fascinated. And we used to mimic them. They were absolutely lovely. So kind and … genteel is the word I would use to describe them.

Anyway, Mum and Dad got this flat in the Peabody Buildings after the war, and it was very sparsely furnished and very cold and a bit grim-looking. And they settled down there. But my gran missed her terribly and, of course, all the other children were gone and married and had children, and so on. So she worked on Mum very, very hard to come back and live at the family home, which is just up the road from here, in Constantine Road.

And so, my parents discussed it, but my mum was not really keen on it because my grandparents were very unhappily married. And they used to fight and argue and shout at each other a lot. I mean, it wasn't physical, but it was certainly unhappy, and they did argue a lot. And Mum was embarrassed about it. So my father said, "Look, it's got nothing to do with us, we're going to be living upstairs, let them get on with it, for God's sake, they're not going to change." He was probably well aware that they were always at it hammer and tongs.

I think Mum would have preferred to have gone home anyway. So basically what happened was that she and Dad moved into the middle part of the house, and Granny and Grandad lived downstairs. And then there was a curmudgeonly old aunt of my grandmother's who lived on the top floor of the house. That's what people did in those days: they all squashed up, didn't they, you know, families? Especially after the war.

And within nine months of their marriage, probably almost to the day, I was born.

I: So that would be in …?

R: September 1946. And then my brother and sister were born in quick succession.[3] There's just sort of barely two years between the three [each] of us. And Dad got a job in the Civil Service, just as a clerk, initially. Because before he joined the Army in India, in-between leaving school and joining the Army, he had worked as a clerk in the post office in northern India. So, he managed to get a job in some service, some department of the civil service, I'm not sure what. So he got a job quickly. Mum was at home with me. Then David came along.

And then, it must have been between David and my sister, Mum said he started to get these absolutely terrible headaches. Really, really horrific. Like migraines, she said. Where he was absolutely, you know, he couldn't cope, he vomited and he couldn't go to work. He was just incapable of doing anything until they passed. And they just got more frequent and closer together. Well, he was incapacitated by these headaches, like, I don't know if you've ever had a migraine. I've had one and you know how debilitating they are. Well, these were dreadful because, I mean, he, you know, he needed to work and he had a young family. And I'm quite sure he was used to hard work and he didn't want to be spending time at home, you know, recovering from them. Oh, sometimes they were accompanied by nose bleeds, I remember her saying. Anyway, apparently one day he arrived on the doorstep during the daytime, and Mum let him in, and he just, I think she said, he vomited, and there was blood. A lot of blood. And he just collapsed. And obviously, whatever was wrong with him was extremely serious. So, [eventually] he was rushed off to the hospital and never came out again.

Now, my mum was pregnant with Jean, so this must have come on between David's birth and Jean's arrival. So, I believe that he would have been in the hospital during the winter of 1949. Jean was born in 1950. June 1950. Well, Mum was heavily pregnant. The hospital where Dad was, at the top of Hampstead, [was] up a very steep hill. There was no way of getting up. There were no buses or anything in those days. And, eventually, he was so ill that when the hospital needed her to come to his bedside, they would send a police car for her to take her up there.

And there was nothing they could do because he had advanced renal failure. Obviously, you know, if it had happened later they would have been able to help him with dialysis. But, I mean, his kidneys were destroyed and he, I would guess, died an extremely ghastly and painful death. And all the time, Mum was hoping he'd get better. Although I have a Christmas card from her to him, either a Christmas card or a birthday card, because his birthday was in February - I can't remember [what card it was], saying, you know, "I can't wait for you to come out of the hospital so we can be a family again". And it's a very sweet little card and, you know, it just makes me feel really tearful.

So anyway, he died on April 3rd 1950. I never saw him again. I don't remember him going into the hospital. It's all a blank, actually. I can remember the day of the funeral quite clearly. I would have been … well … his funeral would have been in April, and I would have been four in September. So I was, yes, 3½, or something. I can remember that day very clearly indeed. I can remember a bit about his illness because I was often not allowed into the room. I was told I was not allowed in there, and I had to sit outside. I can remember that. I can remember being outside of a room and not allowed to go in because there was a lot of blood. This was before he went in. I can remember that.

I: So this was at home?

R: This was at home, yes, prior to his going into the hospital. This was at home. And I think my mother said that this old aunt – well, she wasn't that old at that time, she was probably

[3] See Fig. 3.

60-ish – inadvertently did let me into the room. And I saw a whole load of stuff I shouldn't have seen, and I was absolutely traumatised by it.

So all of that is a bit of a blank. I expect I probably wiped it out of my mind. But the funeral … Of course, in those days children didn't go to funerals. David would have only been two anyway. I mean, he was a baby. And I remember Mum going out of the house in a black dress, and I remember a big black car outside. My grandmother was looking out of the window, so Granny didn't go to the funeral because she had to look after us. And I was trying to get away from my grandmother. She was holding me really tightly, and I was screaming and shouting, and my mother was leaving the house, getting into this car in a black dress. I remember looking through the net curtains, with my grandmother holding on to me for dear life, and I was trying to get out of her clutches and get out of the front door and follow my mother. I remember that very clearly indeed.

I was absolutely traumatised by the whole experience because my father literally disappeared out of my life. And Mum said I was absolutely the apple of his eye. I was his first child. He'd had this horrific experience of being a prisoner of war. He'd had a ghastly childhood, more or less abandoned by his family in India, no-one knows why, but the three of them brought up in this orphanage, having to make his way in the world. Probably the only family he really had was when he was in the Army, because that's what some of these men were to each other. And I was the first thing, apart from mum, that he had that belonged to him. And she said she just let him, you know, take me over. He and I were just absolutely devoted to each other. And then, one minute he was there, and the next minute he wasn't. So, you know, I felt abandoned.

Of course, I didn't realise all this at the time. I had no idea. I was bereft. I used to sit on the stairs and wait for him to come in the door, and have terrible tantrums. Mum didn't know what to do with me. She had David, who was just a little baby, and she was expecting Jean at any minute. I mean, my grandmother was marvellous, you know. My grandparents just said, "Well, don't worry about paying any rent. This is your home. Don't worry. This is your home for as long as you want it to be". Granny looked after us, although she was actually getting on as well because she didn't have Mum until she was in her 40s – about '41 or '42, or something like that. So, she wasn't a spring chicken. But anyway, she was my mother's mainstay for a long time.

So, I was totally and utterly devastated and traumatised, and I do remember that period of my life. I do remember sitting on the stairs and crying and screaming. I wouldn't let my mother out of my sight. It must have been a nightmare, the whole thing. There was no bereavement counselling. There was nothing, absolutely nothing. You just had to get on with it. That's what we all did.

I: Do you remember if your mother told you that your father had died?

R: Well, yes. Well, I don't remember in so many words, but yes. But what do you know of death when you're 3½, you know? Nothing, I suppose. I mean, you might see a dead cat or a dead insect or something, but you have no concept of death or the fact that your parent isn't going to come back. That's something you learn as, you know, you absorb and you learn as you get older. I just don't know what words she used to describe it to me. I just don't remember. I mean, a lot of it would be due to the fact that I was too little, that I had absolutely no experience or any way of being able, any language to be able to describe how I felt. I would imagine I felt, well I know now, I felt very angry indeed. And it affected my life well into adulthood, and my relationships with men, particularly.

So obviously, children do get over these things to a degree, but it makes its mark. And although you get on with your life and you… my childhood I remember as being very

happy, actually. So there, that says it all, doesn't it? Mum had her family around her, her parents, and she had a sister and a brother who lived locally. And she also had a family to bring up. So, in time, things got better in some ways.

Anyway, when Jean was about to be born, she didn't book herself into the hospital. She didn't dare. Because I would scream and shout and be distressed if she was out of my sight for five minutes, she decided … Well, she had us all at home, anyway, so she obviously planned for the midwife to come in when Jean was on the way. And anyway, Granny was downstairs, and she'd had five children, plus a couple of miscarriages. So, you know, she'd have been alright in that department.

Jean was born the 13th June, so she decided she would get David and me to bed on the evening of 12th June. No, hang on … Yes, that's right. I know Jean was born … it must have been in the early hours of 12th [13th] June. Anyway, it turned out that Mum left it all too late before she told my gran and before they could get the midwife. Because Jean was born on the stairs, on the staircase, at Number 6.

When we got up, when David and I got up, probably by my grandmother, it was to discover we had a new sister. So, I do remember that. I remember being outside the room. I suppose Granny and the midwife were tidying up, and then we went in. I remember that. And it was a lovely June summer morning and there was this new baby. From then on, I became a sort of mini-parent, at the age of four. I mentioned before that Mum was deaf. She'd gone deaf in her late teens, actually. Probably a genetic thing because my grandad was deaf and he had three children who were deaf. So, she lost her hearing on one side completely, and she could hear, and she could lip-read. And I think that really affected her with regard to her being a woman, and her attractiveness. She was never a victim of her deafness. I mean, she was not a victim person per se or full stop. She just got on with things and took whatever was thrown at her. She was a very, very strong woman, and I can't understand, and neither can any of us, how she just didn't buckle under the strain of it all and completely, you know, give up and have a nervous breakdown. But she never did.

When Dad and Mum met, I think he must have been a very kind man. Because although she was deaf, very deaf, and I think, as a young woman, you know, that would affect your feeling of being attractive, wouldn't it? If you couldn't hear what someone was saying to you, you would feel you were unattractive in some way. Especially as you had to wear a big, heavy, ugly hearing aid, which they were. I don't know whether you've ever seen a vintage hearing aid, but they're very, very ugly contraptions with wires and things dangling down. And, you know, you couldn't hide them. And you had to wear a big earpiece and sometimes a, well, a big battery attached to your chest. I mean, it was horrible – like a walkie-talkie, almost.

So, I think Dad must have been an inherently understanding and sympathetic man, because they fell in love very quickly and her deafness didn't seem to bother him at all. But I did think, she would never say, but I think it affected her womanliness. I just think it would. She never married again and she actually did say – and I think that's terribly sad – she said, "Well, no-one's going to be interested in me, being deaf and having three children. Who would be interested in me, or find me attractive?" And that was, you know, it was just factual, the way she said it. It wasn't like, in a victim way, it was, "Well, that's life," you know. "Who's going to find me attractive? No-one". So she never remarried and, as far as I know, she didn't have any boyfriends at all. She concentrated on us and her job.

I had to be her ears and, obviously, David was too little, he was only two, so I had to listen out for all sorts of things, like doorbells and the other two crying, especially Jean.

And, in time, the telephone. I don't think we had a phone until I was quite a bit older. I mean, people didn't have fridges, and phones, and washing machines in those days.

So, in time, she had to decide how she was going to make a living. I can't remember her doing all that much before I went to school. I think my going to school was some kind of watershed, when she felt she ought to start doing something about making a living. I remember my first few days at school and they were traumatic. I was rising five. I went to the local convent, and, actually, it was the same one she'd been educated in, Belsize Park. It was post-war, there were between forty and fifty children to a class. It was strict – it was a convent. The first day I went [laughter], I remember having to be dragged, kicking and screaming, across the playground by my mum and a nun. Because I didn't want Mum out of my sight, and that was it. I wasn't going to go to school, and that was it. I was going to stay at home.

But that passed. When I realised, you know, that my mum and my siblings were not going to disappear out of my life, that passed. So I settled down to school, and I absolutely loved it, and I did well. I really, really liked my primary school years, and they were happy, and I had loads of friends. And the education was second to none.

Mum decided that she was going to set up a typing business, so she put out a few feelers and put postcards up in newsagents and maybe in the local paper. I suppose she sort of became a PA to various people. Because we lived in Hampstead, it's chock-a-block full of film stars, and actors, and writers, and eminent people, and wealthy people as well. So she started off in a small way becoming a PA to one or two people who needed someone to type letters and do a bit of light housework. So that's what she did.

She gradually built up a very, very thriving business working for all sorts of people, academics mostly, authors. She got a job with the University of London typing manuscripts. I mean, they were huge. They were manuscripts, they were all written by hand. They were not typed or anything. Sometimes they had bits of typing where, you know, people had crossed stuff out and handwritten a bit and stuck it on with Sellotape. I mean, they were complicated. And she had to decipher people's handwriting. She would work long, long hours often into, well, mostly into the night when we were in bed. We would go to sleep to the sound of her typewriter in the next room.

When she'd done the manuscript, with lots of copies, usually, she often went to the university binders to have it bound. And that's how she made her money. It was long, hard hours, often long into the night, sitting on a rickety chair in front of the typewriter, bashing away at the keys. If we wanted something, if we were ill, like if we had the flu or tonsillitis or chicken pox or measles, we would sit up in her bed. She'd make us up a bed in her room, because her workroom, as we called it, doubled up as her bedroom as well. So we would be in bed, she would be sitting beside us, typing. Your leg could be hanging off or you could have a broken arm, but you were not supposed to talk to her until she got to the end of the page. So we would be standing beside her with some dire emergency going on whilst she'd be bashing away at the keys, watching this page, you know, getting longer and longer. And when she'd finished the page, we'd say, "mum!" you know [laughter]. "So-and-so's fallen down the stairs," or something. Or, "The cat's escaped into the road". [Laughter.] So that was our lives.

I: So this was in the early to late 1950s?

R: In the '50s and '60s, yes.

I: Okay. So essentially, then, after your father's death, your Mum managed to make a living with what she had done –

R: Previously, yes.

I: − before she went into hospital. When she was sixteen, you said, she was a typist.

R: Yes, yes.

I: And you said she obviously had the support of her parents and her grandparents because she could live there for free.

R: That's right.

I: So she had very good family support –

R: Very, yeah.

I: − once your father went into hospital and died.

R: Yes, sure.

I: Did you have a sense of any other support? The wider community? Government? You've said already that there was no bereavement counselling …

R: No, there was nothing. Dad's Army pension died with his death. Although he was a regular, she didn't get his Army pension. The War Widows' Pension was taxed, so this is what –

I: At 50% …

R: Yes. It was an enormous amount of tax. So she got a widow's pension and a War Widows' Pension, which were miniscule because of the tax. That is why the War Widows' Association was founded in the first place – I expect you know about all that – and she was a founder member. By which time, I'd grown up, I was grown up and had a child, you know, for God's sake. So all these war widows scattered around all over the country had their hands tied behind their backs, because they were so busy scratching a living and trying to bring up their families. So they actually couldn't go into action until their families were grown up.

She would not accept what she called charity. Oh, she had the Family Allowance as well, which probably wasn't very much, but she had that. She wouldn't accept anything like benefits or the dole, she wouldn't have heard about it. And we were all brought up in the, you know, we wouldn't be doing that either. We would get educated and we would get a job and that would be it, and you wouldn't be going on the dole or anything like that. That was shameful. And I agree with her, actually.

So she got what was due to her and she gradually built up a business which, although not well-paid, was enough to support her and us. I don't think my grandparents gave her anything. My grandad may have done but… obviously, if she'd have been absolutely desperate, well, yes of course, they would have done. But she was very independent and I don't suppose she would have wanted to accept anything from them. But I mean, she'd have had to have been desperate before she would have done. So she did support us, and she supported us very well. And she managed to get the money together every single year, while we were growing up until we were in our teens, to go away on holiday once a year. We always went away to somewhere like Dorset or Sussex, and she would rent a caravan or a little self, you know, a little flat, a self-catering place. But we always went, and we'd take the dog with us. And, you know, we had as normal a life as possible.

I was the oldest and expected to look after the other two, a lot – which was difficult because, you know, I think it did rob me of part of my childhood. I had to be this sort of pseudo mini-parent. She didn't say as much, but I think once, when I was older, she said, "Oh, I felt very guilty about making you do so much when you were little." But I had to, as I say, we had to listen out for the phone; we had to answer the phone. I had to speak to her clients. I had to take work, finished manuscripts, she would give me the finished manuscript and say, "Take it to so-and-so."

So, I would go and visit all these extremely well-to-do houses of authors and various playwrights, and various people with their plays, and I would be entrusted with the manuscript, to take it to somebody's house. Which I enjoyed, actually. It's nice going into these posh houses and seeing how they all lived [laughter]. And they were all very nice people as well, very kind. She had quite a relationship with a very well-known children's author, called Eleanor Farjeon. I don't know whether you've ever heard of her. She's a very well-known children's author in the '50s and she lived in a beautiful cottage in a very, very nice part of Hampstead, tucked away down a little mews. And I used to take Eleanor Farjeon's manuscripts back to her. I loved going to Eleanor Farjeon's house, I absolutely loved it, and she was so kind. She was supportive to mum, she really was, and Mum made a friend of her. I still have a few books of Eleanor Farjeon's that she signed and dedicated to me, which are probably worth quite a bit of money now. But I'm not going to sell them. [Laughter].

So yeah, Mum always found time to take us out, take us on Hampstead Heath for picnics, let our friends come 'round and play, to take us around London. Mum was a Londoner, she loved London, and she was interested in, well, she loved history. So she would take us to all sorts of historical places. And she educated us, so we could find our way around on public transport. We knew about places like Hampton Court, the Tower of London, Kew Gardens, the history of places. She wrote several little histories of the area, which I still have, which were published. She was a very interesting woman, very well-educated and she was fun, she had a great sense of humour.

Although her life was dogged by ill-health because, I mean, she had all this dreadful arthritis with sitting at this chair all the time, typing. She got terrible, terrible osteoarthritis, and I'm sure that was to do with it. And she had problems with her gynaecological bits because, I suppose, she'd had three children really quickly, she got endometriosis. She wanted to have a hysterectomy and, because the gynaecological departments of hospitals in those days were led by crusty old men, you know, wearing wing collars and, you know, monocles, they wouldn't let her have a… She needed a hysterectomy and they said, "No, you can't have one, you're still of childbearing years," was what they said to her. She was furious but, you know, she was at their mercy.

Finally, she did. When we were adult she had the hysterectomy because her uterus and her gynaecological bits had always caused her a lot of trouble – not exactly illness but, you know, she should have had that operation years and years before. But they would not allow it. And as she said, "Well, I don't want any more children, I've got three children, why would I want any more? I'm a widow, why would I want any more children?" But no, no-one would listen to her.

So, all this took a huge toll on her health and she just battled through, she battled through it. I mean, sometimes, once or twice, she had to go into hospital, so Jean, David, and I were farmed out to various of her siblings. I remember when I was fifteen, we were going to go away on holiday somewhere and Mum had to go into hospital. I can't remember what it was for, now. It could have been for the hysterectomy. Anyway, we all got farmed out to various uncles and aunts. And that was the first time I got taken abroad, when I was fifteen. I just loved that; I went to France, and it was so exciting, with her eldest

brother and his wife. They were actually very well-off. He was a bank manager. So I went to France with them and that was great.

Mum battled and battled, and she would never let, you know, the buggers get her down. She just battled through the whole lot with self-will and determination, actually.

Can we have a little break?

I: Of course. Okay.

I: Right. So Ruth, you told that clearly it was traumatic and difficult for you to lose your father –

R: Very, yes.

I: − at so early an age. And I wondered if you have any recollections of how your mother dealt with it at the time. Did you ever think that she was angry, frustrated, or … ?

R: Well, I think Mum was very angry underneath all of it. Mum came from a Victorian background, my grandparents were Victorians, and they were very straitlaced and controlled. You didn't speak about your emotions. Emotions were all to be swept away under the carpet and you had to keep everything under control. And I think that's how a lot of people of my parents' generation were brought up. Well, in fact, we all know that they kept their emotions well buttoned-down.

So, Mum was very young, she was 26 when all this happened, and she was obviously very much in love with my father. Because they'd only been married for five years and they'd had this incredibly whirlwind romance. And she was as traumatised as I was, not to mention my brother. I've got no idea what effect it had on my brother because, well, that's another story that I might talk about later. She kept it all battened down, the grief and the bereavement. She said that she would wake up in the morning and her pillow would be soaking wet from tears. But during the day we never saw it. She obviously just had to put it to one side and get on.

There were one or two occasions, when I was little, when I saw my mum cry – well, the three of us actually, but I can only remember the effect it had on me. If I saw my mum become tearful or cry, and she was at the end of her tether, at her wits' end, sometimes, with three children, you know, and all that. And, you know, we were certainly not paragons of virtue; we squabbled and fought and were naughty and got up to things, just like all other children. And she literally, literally was at the end of her tether, sometimes. She would occasionally lose control, but very occasionally. And I have seen her cry. And the minute she started to cry, the three of us would start wailing because it was so unusual to see Mum cry or break down or get tearful or emotional. We couldn't cope with it. And she knew that, so she kept it all in, the lot, and she hardly ever let that go. She always kept the lid on it.

Because I can remember I couldn't bear to see it. I just didn't know what to do. I just became a sort of tearful little wreckage. And you know when kids get the [sobbing noise], they sob like that, you know, lose their breath and get out of control. That's how I would get. And she didn't want me to be like that, or any of us, so she kept it all in. But I know it must have been terribly hard for her. And obviously, when we were all in bed and asleep, she did let go. She told us that.

She was a very controlled woman. She didn't think much of emotive displays, she didn't have any time for it, actually, she just didn't have any time for it, she just used to, you know, just sort of flap it away. She just couldn't. She was an emotional woman who kept it all in, and she was a passionate woman as well, but it was all kept very securely under lock and key. But as she got older, she was strict. She was a strict parent. She was a kind parent and a fair parent, but my goodness, she was strict – and she had to be. We would get a wallop if we stepped too far out of line, and we did. Children got smacked in those days, anyway, but we had to watch our p's and q's, and if we pushed her too far we would be put over her lap and given a good smack. So she was a strict parent but she was not cruel or unkind, she was very fair. She was very liberal and tolerant, actually. An educated, intelligent woman, who, you know, driven too far, would snap, as we all would.

But Jean and I agree that she did soften, and she did talk about things more freely. She never burst into tears. She wasn't given to bursting into tears, and neither am I, actually. But I suppose, we were all, you know, brought up in a school of hard knocks, really. So, we learned to be tough, you know. You had to be tough, and that's learned behaviour.

Anyway, we realised that, although she didn't discuss it very much, we all realised that we, as children growing up, we were different. I felt very different at school when I was growing up because we didn't have a dad, and I always felt different. It just marks you, it marks you out that you didn't have a dad, and therefore you were different to everybody else because parents didn't divorce or separate very much in the '50s and there were not many single parents around. Mum was different: (a) because she was widowed, and (b) because she was deaf. And that made us all feel different and set apart in some ways from other children who had more conventional upbringings, and a Mum and a dad, and we didn't. I always felt the loss of my father, and still do, you know. It's never, never gone away.

I can't remember a time when, you know, I mean, it's affected my relationships with, certainly my first husband. I mean, my first husband was actually old enough to be my father. I married a father figure, which was about the last thing I should have done. And Mum wouldn't have wanted me to marry him but, of course, what can you do? You can't stop your children doing things that you know are not going to work out and going to be disastrous, which it was. And you can't lock them up, and you can't threaten them. They just go their own sweet way and then realise what a ghastly mistake they've made. And that's precisely what happened to me.

I did marry a man – I was 22 or 23 – [who] was 46, you know. I mean, it was classic, wasn't it, you know? Mum got on well enough with him. I mean, he could have married her, actually, he was her contemporary. [Laughter.] He was the same age as mum. In fact, he was two years older than her. But that was the end result of my experience; that's what was bound to have happened, and it did. I never found boys of my own age interesting. I never had a normal development as far as meeting boys and having normal relationships with boys. I found boys of my own age just boring and not interesting. And I wanted someone to be a dad and look after me. Neither of which he did, because he was controlling and, actually, Victorian. [Laughter.] So, it was all a bit of a dead loss.

So I did suffer very badly. Mum didn't talk about Dad very much when we were growing up. She talked about him in general terms and she couldn't describe her emotions to us, because we all just got too upset. So it was all kept sort of down. Maybe if it had been twenty years later, or something, when everyone was a bit freer about emotions, and they were. It was almost like it was a bit shameful or a bit disgraceful to talk about your emotions in those days. It was something you never did. You just picked yourself up and got on with it and carried on regardless. That's what you did. And that's what she did.

And it got her through her life. That was her way of coping and it got her through and it got the three of us. We were all a bit bashed and battered and probably, if we'd… I wrote an article about it for *Courage*. I was special needs coordinator at a school, and I started off by saying, you know, "If special needs had existed in those days, we'd have all been labelled from top to bottom, you know, what with being a single parent and, well, a parent with a disability".

Mum's biggest fear was that we'd be taken into care. She was terrified of it because she obviously must have felt she was going under, sometimes. So, she was absolutely petrified that we would all be carted off into care, and that she wouldn't be able to get us out again. And she would sometimes threaten us and say, "Look, if you behave like that, you're all going to end up in a children's home." Which, of course, frightened us to death, so we'd be a bit better until the next time. But that was her biggest fear, that she would lose us, and we would get reported to the welfare, or something.

So she wouldn't have anything to do with welfare people, social workers or anyone; she just wouldn't have anything to do with them. And I think she was right, actually. So from that point of view, we were, I think, I felt we were a little family unit that was isolated, somehow.

I: To a certain extent, she was lucky because she could do her work from home.

R: Well, yes.

I: And that meant, unlike other widowed mothers, she didn't have to go out –

R: Yes, she didn't have to go out of the house. Yes, she was always at home, always at home. She hardly ever went out with, she never went out in the evening, ever, ever. I think, maybe, my uncle took her to the cinema once or twice while we were little. Unfortunately, he decided to emigrate to Australia; he had a massive family. We had a very big, extended family and lots of cousins. We had an aunt who lived over the road and she had a son, and my mother's nearest sibling, Uncle Ronnie, lived locally while we were growing up. And he had this massive family of twelve children. So all the cousins would get together; we all lived near each other.

In those days, children just went out, you know. She'd say, "Look, go out, take the dog, and which one of you has got a watch? You must be back here by …". This was common practice in the '50s. "Woe betide you if you're not back by four o'clock", or whatever. We just ran riot over Hampstead Heath. I don't know whether you know Hampstead Heath, but it's a massive, massive area of sort of semi-wilderness. And we used to run riot. We used to go over there all day and run around and, you know, make camps and paddle in the ponds, and get filthy dirty, and have a great time. My cousins used to make trolleys out of bits of wood and pram wheels, and we used to, you know, ride them down hills, and get into all sorts of trouble and scrapes.

Because that's what you did in the '50s, you know. We grew up in a time where children had a lot of freedom, they were very independent, you were very streetwise, you learned to fend for yourself and stand up for yourself. And if someone hit you, you just hit them back. We used to have a great time growing up because we had masses of freedom. In the summer holidays Mum would say, "Right, I'm making you up these sandwiches, here's your fare, you can go to the Natural History Museum on the Tube". Right. So off we went, the three of us, with me in charge, right across London to Kensington and back again. No problems. That's what you did.

And like that, we learned to get around London on the Tube and buses on our own. I went to school, which was in Southwark, which is in South London. I used to leave Hampstead at 8:15 in the morning, get on two buses and go to Southwark every day, on my own. You wouldn't even hear of that happening now. We all were very independent, we were given a lot of freedom and it was a way of becoming streetwise; we were all very streetwise. We knew how to look after ourselves. And that was all part and parcel of growing up at that time. And, as I said, Mum combined that with giving us a family holiday every year, even though we might be staying in a caravan on the edge of a cliff [laughter], and taking us around to various parts of London. So we really knew our city, and we knew our heritage. She was very proud of being a Londoner and she was massively interested in history, and it all percolated down to us as well. We had a fabulous childhood.

I don't remember my childhood as being unhappy. I don't remember my mum being a victim and sitting around and saying, you know, life had dealt her a hard blow. I remember my childhood as being absolutely packed with good memories, lots and lots of activities, a lot of family events, of just being educated and having a good time. It was hard for anybody immediately post war. London was full of bomb sites. In fact, Mum used to take us down into the city to show us the bombed-out buildings.

And Mum was very, very anti-German, I'm sorry to say, because I know you're of German extraction. But, as I said earlier, she had a massive amount of anger in her, massive amount of anger, which she kept battened down. It did percolate through to me. I was a very angry child and a very angry person, well into my 20s and probably in my 30s. And I've never understood what it was all about. But it was about that, it was about what had happened to us. And—

I: So your Mum had definitely a great sense, as a war widow of course, that her husband had been killed by these people.

R: Yes, yes.

I: Did you have the same sense, growing up, that your father was killed as a result of the war?

R: Yes, yes, my mother was quite forthright, and she didn't beat about the bush at all. She said, you know, the Germans had killed my father. And that's what we were brought up to believe.[4] I'm going to tell you a story, and I apologise in advance because of your German background. But there was a girl in my class who came, I must have been in Year 6, yes, I was eleven, so it was just before I had to go into secondary school. There was a girl in my class who joined the school late, she came in Year 6, and she had been living in Germany. She wasn't German – her father must have been in the Forces, or something – but she'd been living in Germany, and she spoke German. Obviously, she spoke German. And I didn't like her. I didn't like her because I thought she was German.

[4] Respondent clarification: As she grew older, Mum's attitude softened, and she became more objective about the events of her younger life. As she acquired more of the family house, she rented out one or two rooms to a variety of tenants, including, at some point, a young German student. Apparently, this young student had confided in Mum that she was so ashamed of what had happened at the hands of the Nazis that she was thinking of changing her name. My mother talked to her about her feelings and told her that she could not possibly take on that sort of guilt as she was not even born, or only a baby or small child, when all that happened. So, a lot of that anger I discuss here dissipated over the years.

And so I was horrible to her. I got her engaged in a fight and really hurt her because she was German, I thought. She wasn't German. She was British or Irish, or something.

But that was what Mum felt. She felt that Dad had had this, he had had an awful life. It was his first opportunity to have a normal, married, happy family life, and it had been taken away from him. He was 40 years old and it was as a result of the war, and the Germans had killed him. They hadn't killed him exactly, but if he hadn't have had that terrible experience at the end of the war, he would have probably survived. But, on the other hand, he could have been killed in another theatre of war. They may never have met. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you because of my father's experience and what brought them together.

But Mum was incapable, she would never have looked at it from that angle. If she hadn't have had that illness and Dad hadn't gone to that military hospital at Ashridge, they would never have met. And they wouldn't have had their three children. But, as far as I know, she never looked at it from that point of view. She was really, really, apart from being grief-stricken and bereaved and traumatised by the whole thing, she was angry, really angry. And that drove her; that anger drove her through her life. I'm quite sure of it, because I did experience it as well because I was very angry, and I often feel that some of the things that happened to me afterwards, after I married my first husband, that my anger drove me through a lot of negative experiences I had after that.

And that was born of my mum's anger. Although she may not have openly expressed it, it was always there and I always felt it, and I always shared it with her. So yes, she was a very angry woman, and I think it was what helped her, actually, get through a lot of her life and a lot of disappointments. But it certainly percolated down. And I was angry in my own right, anyway; I was angry that I'd been abandoned by my dad – that's how I saw it, well, I understood that that's what it was, abandonment. When I was older and I could analyse everything that had happened, it was an abandonment of me by him. And I was angry with him for doing that, because I didn't understand it. And because things were, there was such a tight lid on everything while we were growing up, you didn't talk about those sorts of things. You didn't want to crack up and break down. It took me such a long time to work it all out.

I do understand now what she went through. We didn't appreciate it, obviously, when we were little. How can you, you know? You can't. All we knew was that a bombshell had hit us and we were in it altogether, and that's what you did. You took it because it was dealt to you, and you got through it because there was nothing to support you. If Mum hadn't had her Mum at home, I don't know what she'd have done, quite honestly.

But then, you know, a further blow struck her because my grandmother was found to have terminal cancer. So Mum had to look after her as well. So when I was about, oh, eleven or twelve, Granny, who never, ever went near a doctor, never; she hated them with a vengeance and would never go near one, had had this cancer for a long time. And she collapsed in the end and got carted off to the hospital, where they found that, you know, she was riddled with cancer. And although they did try to treat it, it just spread all over.

So Mum looked after Granny for about three years and nursed her through her last illness, at home. Granny and Mum were very, very close. Of all the children, Mum and Gran were the closest, because the others had all gone off and were doing their thing. And Uncle Ronnie, who Mum was very, very close to and had really loved him, had gone off to Australia, you see. So that was all caput as well.

So, with Granny's illness, I mean, we were teenagers then and we were very aware of the dreadful strain it took on her, and the toll it took on her. Because, again, cancer was a word that was never mentioned, you mustn't mention it, you know. It had this, I don't know, it had this taboo about it. So when mum, I remember being with Mum in the street, you know, and she'd meet a friend and they'd say, "Oh, and how's your mum?" They'd go into those hushed tones about, that's because people did.

I was about thirteen or fourteen when Granny died, and then, now you're not going to believe what I'm going to tell you now, the batty old aunt upstairs – I mean, by this time, she had got dementia – she was a spinster, she'd been in service. She was my grandmother's aunt, and, along with all the rest of the family [living in this house], she occupied the attic rooms in the top of the house. But by the time Granny died, Auntie Caroline she was, but we called her Aunt Car, she was in her 80s or something, and she was getting dementia. So Mum ended up looking after her as well, until such time as she couldn't cope with her anymore, because she really had gone, you know, AWOL.

So she [Aunt Car], for the last few years of her life, went into a home. But Mum had power of attorney for her. So yes, I don't think Mum had time to sit down and tear her hair out and say, "Oh, woe is me!" She was always too busy. She had too much to occupy her. She was just working, working all the time.

I: So this was in the mid to late '50s?

R: So we're talking about the very early '60s now, yes. When Granny died I was thirteen, so that would have been … oh, hang on … '59, I suppose. '59 or '60. Maybe I was fourteen. So we've come up to about 1960 now, yes.

I: Did she work through caring for her mother? She kept working?

R: Yes, yes, kept working. She never stopped, she never, ever stopped working, ever. She always had, she'd say, "Oh, I'm snowed under with work this month". Or, "Oh, I've got a rush job". A rush job meant she had to squash it in-between perhaps two manuscripts she was doing. Someone would ring her up. I mean, she worked for all sorts of people, I think she typed something for the Duke of Edinburgh once. She worked for absolutely all sorts of people, for universities and authors and scientists and historians. You name it, she worked for organisations; she always had loads and loads of work.

I: So it was, by the sound of it, partly because you, and your siblings, and your mother were able to live with your grandparents, in their house—

R: Yes.

I: —and because your mother managed to set up for herself an incredibly successful business that she worked hard for … As a result of that, as I understand it, then, you never felt like there was any economic hardship, any kind of financial hardship?

R: We did. Well, we knew we were not well-off. There was always enough money for food. I mean, Granny would always cook Sunday lunch, and my grandfather was well-paid, he had a good job. So there was always, Granny would always, I'm sure they had an arrangement, Mum and Gran, whereby they pitched in for food. I don't know. I mean, a load of stuff was rationed, anyway, it was rationed. I remember queuing up in Sainsbury's and various shops with ration books when I was growing [up] in the early '50s. We'd go to Sainsbury's or the butcher's, or wherever, and everything was on ration and you were only allowed a certain amount. I always remember going to the market with my

grandmother on a Saturday and we'd buy up loads and loads of, she'd buy loads of fruit and veg and stuff in the market.

There was always enough food, and Mum would never, never let us go to school without, she cooked us a breakfast in the morning. It used to amaze me, Nadine, when I was working as a teacher that children would come to school with no breakfast. They'd either have a packet of crisps or a bag of sweets. And, of course, they fell asleep in school; they were cold and they were hungry, and they'd fall asleep. I knew they couldn't learn. Why is that? I don't understand it. Mum cooked us a breakfast; we'd either have bacon and eggs or scrambled eggs, or a boiled egg or a fried egg, and we'd have porridge. Now, I never understood that when I was teaching, why children would come to school with no breakfast, or a bag of crisps. A bowl of porridge does not cost much; a bowl of porridge with some milk and a bit of brown sugar or golden syrup, and a bit of toast. That doesn't cost much. Why do children have to starve, and their only meal is the one they get at lunchtime at school, very often. Because you can cook healthy, basic food for very little.

So, Gran and Mum had an arrangement. I don't know what it was. Obviously, when Granny got too ill to do anything, Mum had to do the lot. Granny couldn't go and carry heavy shopping bags about or stand over a cooker, or anything like that. So, Mum would be cooking for us and my grandfather as well, because he wouldn't have known how to boil an egg. He was a typical Victorian man. Women's place was in the home, and his place was out working, or in the pub. [Laughter.]

But, between us all, we coped. We were aware that we were not as well-off as a lot of other children, but we always had clothes on our backs, a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs, throughout our childhood. So, you know, Mum didn't bang on about it all the time. She didn't say, "We can't have this and we can't have that." She went without herself, she went without. If we had to get clothes sometimes from a jumble sale, so be it. I don't know whether you know what a jumble sale is [laughter], but jumble sales were very popular in the '50s and '60s. And, you know, we always had good shoes. She'd go out in the autumn, we'd have an expedition to the shops in the autumn; we'd all be kitted up with new shoes for the winter, all new school uniform, and in the summer we'd all go to the shop and get sandals and summer clothes. So, we always had clothes. They may not have been the height of fashion but they were always new clothes, and we were always clean, and well-scrubbed, and well-fed.

I: You did say that, because you grew up without a father and because your mother was a war widow and also deaf, you did feel like you were different.

R: Yes. Yes, I did.

I: So, was there ever a sense of a community of war widows? Because there must have been other women around—

R: No.

I: —who'd also lost their husbands in the war?

R: None at all. No, never met any. I mean, one thing I will say, which isn't to do with what you just asked me, but it's just come into my head. I discussed it a bit with Jean. Jean and I discuss a lot. Jean was born after he died, after Dad died, so she grew up completely without a father. I grew up with a knowledge of a father. So our experiences have been very different. Jean said, "I didn't have a father, I never knew him, and

therefore I don't miss him." And I grew up with the knowledge of a father, and traumatised by his loss, and very much missing him.

She had a normal adolescent, I'd say much more normal than I did, anyway, normal adolescent period in her life, where she went out with boys of her own age, and did what teenagers do and got up to the stuff that teenagers do with, as I say, boys, her peers. Whereas I did not, I didn't do any of those things. I always fraternised with people a lot older than me and preferred older men. Because I had this great big hole in my life, which Jean didn't. I don't feel envious or anything of her. It's just the way.

R: Yes, we all grew up with a different experience. Isn't that interesting? I was the one who had to be in charge; I was the one who was probably more traumatised than the other two, because David can't really remember. He says, "I remember a man." He was only two. Jean had no experience so she doesn't have any sort of grief or bereavement. And we all had lived in the same house, with the same mother, and had the same upbringing, but we all had different experiences of that single event. I often wonder what it would have been like had we gone on and, you know, as a normal family and he hadn't died like that. Just hypothetical, isn't it?

Do you want me to move on a bit, more forwards to when Mum got involved with the war widows at this point … ?

I: Yes. You've already said that your Mum told you and that you felt that you all had this incredible sense of anger at, you know, …

R: Well, yes. An unfairness. Injustice. Yes.

I: Yes, and not having that family life. And I wonder, then, if that almost naturally fed into—?

R: Well, I suppose it did because, obviously, all the war widows, especially the early ones, probably all felt like she did, you know, this outrage and anger and frustration, and everything else negative you can possibly imagine. And the helplessness. They were powerless to do anything. I think that because of the unfairness and injustice of it all, it helped them with their campaign. Because they were all kind of randomly spread across the country. None of them were in contact with each other at all and neither did my mum know, we didn't know any other widows. I don't even remember having a friend whose parent was a widow. That's why I just felt out on a limb.

I remember having a row with a friend of mine who lived down the road, and we had this childish row, as children do, we had a quarrel. And she said, "I'm not staying here anymore", and she went slamming out of the door. And I opened the letterbox and I shouted, "Well, it's alright for you, you've got a dad". So that's how angry I felt.

It was because of an article that was published in the paper, I think it was the *Daily Mail*, or one of those papers anyway. A returning war widow from … Do you know of this story? This is what got the first group together in about 1969 or 1970. Well, I won't repeat that because you know the story of the Australian war widow.

I: So this is Laura Connelly, isn't it?

R: I'm not sure of her name.

I: I think it was Laura Connelly, and in Britain, as you said before, the pitiful War Widows' Pension—

R: Yes, it was taxed, yes.

I: —was taxed at 50% because it was [considered] "unearned income".

R: Yes, that's correct. Well, that didn't happen in Australia. The woman in question, I think must have been widowed for a second time, and decided to come back to England. And to her horror, found that her War Widows' Pension was going to be heavily taxed, and refused to pay the tax. She was absolutely adamant she wasn't going to pay it and so she was threatened with some hideous punishment by Inland Revenue. And her case was taken up by one of the dailies. I can't remember which one it was.[5] It doesn't matter. Oh, it may have been the *Sunday Mail*, one of those. And she was given a load of publicity, which brought it into the public domain. There was absolute outrage and the powers that be backed down.

This is what instigated a group of war widows spread over the country to come together. There was no email, not everyone had a telephone, you had to do it all by letter. A group of war widows managed to galvanise themselves, in about 1969, I think, and met in London in a Lyons Corner House. I don't know whereabouts in London, but Mum was one of them. And they decided that on the back of this case they would form the War Widows' Association of Great Britain. So it started off in a very small way with only a handful of women who had been, you know, all had the same experience. They'd all been scattered around all over the shop, and all been busy bringing up their families, and hadn't had time to sort of, you know, brush their hair, let alone organise a pressure group.

So gradually, they got themselves organised and put more and more pressure on government. Over the years, it took years and years before the government decided that they would not tax the War Widows' Pension. It took a long time and a lot of pressure, and a lot of letters, and a lot of support from interested parties, people like Baroness Strange, who was the President for a while. And, of course, Prince Charles is their patron. And he's a bloody good patron as well and very supportive to them.

They've got an awful lot of clout now; they didn't have much clout in those days, they were just a little disparate group of women, standing up for their rights. But because they had the experiences that they'd had, they were persistent and they weren't going to give up. And that's what has made them into the organisation that they are now. Mum was a regional organiser for London, for years and years, which meant that she organised the Cenotaph event. Have you ever been to it? You have?

I: Yes.

R: The War Widows' [Association's] one? I was away last year. I always go but I missed it last year. Well, she organised that for years, decades, in fact. And it started off, on the Saturday before the big, you know, the big Remembrance do on the Sunday, the day before, a little group of them would go down to Whitehall. And they'd have a Chaplain with them, and I think they may have had a choir, a small choir, perhaps a handful of people, choirboys someone had managed to get from somewhere. And they'd stand in the middle of the traffic with buses and cars and lorries whooshing up and down, and have their little service at the Cenotaph, dodging all the vehicles, and trying to make themselves heard over the din and the uproar. They would lay the wreath and then they would weave back through the traffic, avoiding getting mown down. And as soon as they'd gone, someone would come out from one of the governmental offices, take the

[5] Clarification: Laura Connolly's case was featured in a Sunday newspaper in 1971.

wreath and throw it away. That's what they did, for years, until they started to get a little bit more … .

I: I had no idea …

R: Yes, yes. That's what they did. It was very comical the way she described it, with all these old women getting on, and a rather crotchety old clergyman sort of tottering across the road with the wreath,[6] trying to sing a hymn with all the traffic hurling by. And not even a police escort or anything, they just felt they had to, they were allowed to do it but they had to get it done as, the bottom line was 'get it over and done as soon as possible and get out', was the feeling.
But then, as they grew and grew and had more and more members and became more important, and had more clout, it's become a big event.

I: Yes, and now, of course, it's close.

R: Yes, very close. Yes, I mean, Mum said, "As soon as one of them is over, I have to start organising the next year's event." She had to liaise with the police; she had to liaise with the St John's Ambulance; she had to liaise with the government. Also, she had to organise an event at a restaurant. She had to get all the orders of service printed, and organise a couple of coaches, depending on where the venue would be for the meal afterwards. There was an enormous amount of organisation she would say it required. And she organised it virtually up to the day she died.

I: When was that?

R: She died in 2007. Now, that was the year she decided to resign from her duty. She said, "I've done it for long enough, I don't want to do it anymore. I'm going to hand it over". Those were her words. "I'm handing it over". So that was the last one she organised, so it would have been, it would have been about the, yes, it was the 8th November 2007, the last one she organised.

Mum didn't like using a wheelchair. She'd got to the point where she actually needed a wheelchair but she didn't like using one, she would avoid it. So, come Remembrance, the 8th November, Mum had got very frail by that time. Jeremy and I went to the war widows' ceremony on that Saturday and we took her, and we had free parking. She always got free parking in, oh God, I can't remember the city, it's not city, Westminster Boys' car park, just off the side of Westminster, we had a permit. We had the wheelchair in the back of the car. So I said to her, "Shall we take the wheelchair?" And she said, "Oh no, I don't, it's not very far, it's only a walk up the King Charles Street. But for her, that was quite a long walk, it took quite a long time. So she said no, she didn't want it, so we left it in the car. She said, "Anyway, they have wheelchairs there, at the event", she said, "there'll be a wheelchair. So, if I want to, I'll go in that".

Anyway, the time came to go to the ceremony, and we got to the bottom of the steps at the back of King Charles Street and, actually, she was looking like she wasn't going to get up them. So we found a couple of strong [men]. Jeremy and another sort of big, strong military bloke sort of virtually heaved her up the stairs and we walked through to King Charles Street, where everyone was assembled, and they were about to start. And I looked around for a wheelchair and there were none, because we'd taken so long. So I couldn't because the security's so heavy, I couldn't go back and get it, because they wouldn't let me through. So she had to stand. It was a very cold day as well, that day,

[6] Respondent clarification: I was in my very early thirties then, and these women appeared old to me then, even though many of them were only in their 50s and 60s.

and she was standing, sort of propped up holding onto something. A barrier, I think, or something. It's not a long service but, anyway, it really, really was too much for her.

And also, that day, Prince Charles turned up as well out of the [blue]. He does sometimes. It's unannounced because it has to be. But then he came to the reception afterwards and was introduced to everyone, and she and he had a chat. Because she was a regional officer [organiser] and she went to a lot of events in London, and she met him quite a few times because he's a very good patron and turns up to a lot of things. So they were having a chat and then we had our meal and we came home.

And the very next Thursday, I was going away for a few days to France. So the day before, so we're talking about the 14th of November, the day before Jeremy and I were going to France, I went up to see her. My cousin, John, was having lunch with her, her eldest nephew from Surrey had come up to see her for the day. She and he were having lunch and I came in and I said, "Oh, we're going to France tomorrow." And she said, "Okay," and she said something really strange. I don't know why she said it but it stuck in my mind. She said, "When you come back," it was only for a week we were going, she said, "When you come back from France we'll go through that old box of your dad's." Out of the blue. So I said, "Okay," because I knew about that box, it's always been around since we were kids, it's got a few bits and bobs of his in it. She said, "We'll go through that old box of your dad's." So I said, "Okay, we'll do that. I'll see you next week."

The next day was Thursday the 15th, and we set off very early to get the boat to go over to France. And on the way, I had a phone call from my sister, very early in the morning, to say, "Ring me when you get this message". Anyway, I could not contact her, I kept ringing and kept ringing. The further away we got from London, it was the same, I couldn't contact her. I didn't know what was going on. My feeling now, afterwards, I should have gone back, but I didn't.

What had happened was that Mum had rung her up very early in the morning, on Thursday morning, and said she felt really ill, had terrible, terrible pain in her back. Well, Mum always had a pain in her back, you know, Mum was riddled with osteoarthritis, but this was something else. So Jean decided to take her to the hospital. the Royal Free Hospital was just down the road from where they live. So, the reason I couldn't contact them was because there was no signal in the basement of the hospital where the A&E was. So I was ringing and ringing, and they were in the hospital and I didn't know.

It was not until we almost got down to Dover that I managed to contact somebody because my brother was out at work, and Jean was the only one around. So, she couldn't contact me, and I think she'd spoken to David. She just said she was at the hospital with mum. When I got down to Dover, I had managed to get through to either my sister or my brother-in-law, or vice-versa, and they said that Mum was ill, she was in the hospital and that was all under control. But I then said to Jeremy, "I'm not going to France, I'm going to go home". So he put me on a train to come home. Unfortunately, we were going on holiday with some people – not holiday, just, we have a house over in Normandy, so it's not that far, over across the Channel – but we'd arranged to meet these people. So he went on to France; I got on a train and went back home.

Unfortunately, I must have got the slowest train that was ever timetabled to travel between Dover and Victoria. It stopped at every tiny, little place on the way. When I got to Victoria Station, I was getting in a panic because Mum was obviously very ill, there was something very… I'd managed to speak with my brother-in-law while I was on the train, and I knew I had to get back as fast as possible. I thought, "I'll get in a taxi". I didn't have enough money for the taxi. There was a huge queue for taxis at Victoria. I explained to the person at the top of the queue, "I've got to get, my mum's in hospital, I think

something terrible has happened". They let me jump the queue, I got into the taxi, I explained to the driver, "Look, I haven't got enough money, I've only got so-and-so". And do you know what he said? "Oh, I'll take you as far as your money will last". Can you imagine? He knew I was in the most terrible plight. I said, "Look, stop off, we'll get some money on the way, but I need to get to the Royal Free Hospital". He was a really unpleasant man.

Anyway, he did actually take me to hospital. I flung the money at him through the window and rushed in, only to find that my mother had died. I'd missed it by half an hour, something like that. What the hospital had done, I mean, I'll never forgive them, and it would have been pointless trying to sue them or kicking up a fuss about it. Mum had gone in with excruciating pain in her back, in her upper back. She had generalised, she had, as I said, terrible, she was in constant pain all the time. Now, excruciating pain in the upper back of a woman usually symbolises heart. With a man, it's down the arm. With a woman, it's mostly in the back.

She'd been in the hospital since early morning, they'd sedated her and they'd done some tests on her, and she'd gone to sleep for a little while, they'd given her painkillers. And then they decided to discharge her with painkillers. My sister and my brother-in-law were getting her into her wheelchair when, all of a sudden, she screamed out, "The pain has come back," and collapsed. And she'd had an aneurysm, an aortic aneurysm, and died instantly. But the hospital hadn't sussed it out, and they should have done.

I think operating for an aneurysm on an 84-year-old woman who was clearly, you know, very frail would have proved fatal, to be honest. But what made me really angry was that they hadn't worked out what it was. I mean, it was classic, classic symptoms. And she died instantly. And Mum always said to us, she always, always said, "When I die I want it to be [clicks fingers], like that. And she would click her fingers, and that is exactly what happened. She died instantly. She said, "I cannot bear to think that I would die a long, drawn-out death." Like her mother, you see, and probably my dad. You know, she'd seen enough of that in her life and she just wanted to drop dead, and she dropped dead, and that's what she wanted. And we just said, "Well, she got her wish." I mean, we were poleaxed by it, it was so sudden. And I was, you know, I got to the hospital just that little bit too late.

So it was a massive shock because when it's a sudden death you don't have any time to prepare for it. But I wonder, you know, it did cross my mind whether she'd had some kind of premonition when she'd said to me, "Look, when you come home we'll go through that box of your dad's." Out of the blue, I mean, it came, I just thought, "Why did she say that?" So yeah, it was a terrific shock, but one of the nice things at her funeral was that Prince Charles had written us a lovely letter of, because he'd only met her a few days before. They'd had this chat, you see, at the War Widows' [Association] bash, you know, after the ceremony. And he wrote this absolutely lovely personalised letter, which we read at the funeral. So yes, Mum got, her last wish was fulfilled.

But I understand now that the War Widows' Association, of which I'm an Associate Member, as you know, has gone on to bigger and better things. And I think there are quite a lot of war widows in my little circle of friends who are not so happy with it now, as they used to be because it's becoming quite a corporate organisation; this is what they feel, anyway. It was a, when Mum was alive and, well, I suppose, seven, ten years ago now, ten years ago, it was a very different organisation to what it is now. It was closer and it was a little bit more, it wasn't quite as professional as it is now, it's become very professional. It was a little bit more amateurish then.

I: Grass roots.

R: Yes. But of course, the older ladies are dying, you see. And the other sad thing about the war widows is that the War Widows' Association as it is will become defunct, unless wars continue to happen. Which I find it rather ironic – unless we have wars, we won't have any war widows. Really, it's going into the future now, the War Widows [Association]. I mean, one or two war widows I know, the older ones, they do grouse about it, but, you know, times move on, it has to change. It has to become more upmarket and sort of be, compete in a… it's a charity, you know, it has to compete in a corporate world. And it's not the sort of little amateur thing that it was years ago, which was much cosier, much friendlier. Yes, more anachronistic, I suppose, yes.

I: Well, you've given us an amazing picture of, I think, your mother's life, but also how it was defined, in a way, by her war widowhood. Even though, as you said, she just kept going on. She just carried on.

R: Yes.

I: And also how it affected you and your siblings. What do you think is different now for war widows? Has the War Widows' Association done its job because the tax was abolished?

R: I think they have, I think the War Widows' Association's been very, very successful. I mean, I'm still an associate member and I will continue to be an associate member. I think that there are people who work exceptionally hard for war widows, and war widows have got, obviously, a much better deal than when Mum was struggling along, and also her peers. And even after the War Widows were founded and they became an organisation, things were still not very good for them. They still had to struggle; not so much because their children had grown up by then. They were a bunch of very doughty, feisty women; they were formidable, actually, those women. You would not like to meet them up a dark alley late at night.

They really fought hard, and I think they continue to fight hard. I think they might have taken a different direction now but, I mean, I think that's inevitable. They've had to change; they're not the same organisation that was founded but, I mean, they're not going to be successful if they stay in the same place. And I think that younger war widows have got a hell of a lot more going for them now. I mean, it's tragic, they lose their husbands, it's terrible that their husbands give their lives in service to their country. But that is one thing that when you sign up as a soldier or in the services, you have to be prepared to do. But all the same, you know, if you are a woman whose husband loses his life in the service of the country, or a man whose wife loses it for the … On the other hand, not many war widowers, but it does happen sometimes. It's different to losing your husband in a car accident or from a disease, you know. Your husband has given his life in the service of the country. And therefore, you do deserve to be compensated in a way that other widows would not be compensated.

I think that that's what I always felt, and I think the War Widows' [Association] should continue in that vein. If you give your life up in the service of the country then your family deserves, not to be rewarded, but to be compensated in some way, and that's the end of it. That's what I believe. And I feel that the war widows of yesteryear were dealt a very hard blow and they were not treated like war widows in other countries, for example, in Australia. They were treated very badly; they were penalised for being war widows. And that's not on. So I hope the War Widows' [Association] continues to be a successful organisation and to flourish. But it will only flourish if there are more war widows – and that's what the sad side of it is, in my opinion. It's a defunct organisation, like UKIP, you know, if there are no wars there will be no war widows. It won't have a purpose or an aim, will it? And there always will be wars.

Of course, there are men or women who will be not directly killed in a war, but will die several years later, like my father did. And like the husband of the present London rep; her husband was badly injured in the Gulf, Gulf or Falklands, I can't remember, and died ten years ago. She was a newly-bereaved war widow who my mum handed the reins to. She used to come to see Mum and Mum used to talk to her, and she said, "I want," her name's Kathy, she said, "Kathy's the person I want to take over from me". And that's what happened. She has. But yes, they were strong women, those war widows. And I think, probably, war widows nowadays maybe don't have to be quite as strong and tough as those ones did. They've got more support from the government and from counselling and bereavement agencies. And money, they have more money, you know, that's what they needed and what they didn't have.

I: I think your mother was very concerned about the future of War Widows. She wrote a letter for the War Widows' Association website that asked younger war widows of new generations

R: That's correct.

I: − to continue to band together.

R: Yes, she did.

I: Do you think that will happen with the new generation of war widows?

R: Well, I'm not sure, actually. I know that Mum always said to me, "Look, if younger war widows don't support us and join us then we will fizzle out and we won't be an association anymore. And," she said, "we worked so hard for this, you know, we worked our socks off and we gave up so much, and if they don't show willing then the War Widows' Association, as it is, won't survive anymore."

But I understand, from bits of, because I don't join in, I do go to War Widows' [Association] events, but not many, only a few, only the London ones. But from grass roots' gossip – it's not gossip, actually, it's not gossip – I think what they're saying is that there are other groups that are banding together. The War Widows' [Association] is not an exclusive group anymore. There's Army Widows and there's another organisation, I don't know what they're all called but …

I: Each arm of the services has its own widows' association.

R: Yes, yes. And I think that there are other rival groups starting up, which isn't a bad thing, in a way, because I mean, they've all got the same goal in mind, haven't they? I go to the War Widows, both events, I go to both when I'm here, that is; I go to one on the Saturday and the one on the Sunday, the big one. And it is noticeable that most of the women are older. There are a few, and there are a few children, you know, grandchildren, perhaps, or children of younger widows.

But I do understand, from what is being said, that there are other groups that have got together and maybe the War Widows doesn't have the same membership as it did. And certainly, if you look in 'Courage' magazine, you'll see that all the events are all, you know, the Christmas events, all the Remembrance events, all the get-togethers, they're all sort of snowy-white-haired ladies with walking sticks. [Laughter]. And there are no younger ones.

I: But of course, we do know that younger war widows exist.

R: Yes, we do. I hope that, you know, mum's fears will be allayed in that respect because it was something she was concerned about. But you can't make them join; they'll only join, (a) if they're ready and, (b) if they want to. You can't, you know, bereavement is something that, you can't control it; you can't make somebody join an organisation when they're in the middle of a bereavement or they're grief-stricken. They will gradually come round to it. Because, I mean, the War Widows will be, are terrifically supportive to each other, and they have an awful lot more funding than they did have. An awful lot more. They're a much wealthier organisation than they used to be. So, you know, it's really in the lap of the Gods, isn't it, whether people join it or not.

I: So, your mother, Joyce Maxwell, she, of course, was a war widow, that's what we've spoken about. And she ended up organising the War Widows' Association Service of Remembrance, the Saturday, as you said, before the official service, for 35 years, something like that?

R: Oh, it must have been, yes. Yes, absolutely. Years and years, yes.

I: Partly, of course, to commemorate your father—

R: Oh, of course, yes.

I: —as well as the other husbands who were killed in the war. And you've said you still continue to go?

R: Yes, I go every year.

I: And you'll keep going to both of them?

R: I will go to both of them for as long as I can, yes. There's a lot of standing about. That's another thing, you see, a lot of them can't do, especially the Sunday one. Mum used to go to the Sunday one but, because of her position, she got a seat in Richmond House so she could look down on it. But I think the numbers that do go to the Sunday one are shrinking because you have to stand for a long time, for hours. It's very tiring. So you've got to be fairly fit or pretty determined to be able to stand.

And they do look after the Saturday ones, because they provide wheelchairs. After that unfortunate experience with the wheelchairs, I think they learned that they need more wheelchairs rather than less, now. But, well, you know, it depends how the cookie crumbles as far as membership is concerned, and how long they will keep going. But I certainly will hang on to my associate membership. I wouldn't have been able to do this interview without it, and I think it's a very valuable thing to have done. So it's going to be archived and will be used for research, or, in the future.

I think my mum's experience, or our experience as a family, was massively important as a bit of social history. If I were an historian in the future, I'd be really interested to read this, because it just shows how, it just illustrates how (a) women were just really swept aside. They were just swept aside. They weren't important. Women didn't have the status in those days that they have now. They were just left to get on, left to their own devices and left to bring up their families, without any intervention whatsoever. And it was sink or swim time, and it was weakest to the wall. That's what it was. And we were lucky that we had a mother like we did, and that we had an extended family, because we did, and that's how we got by. It was just sheer grit and determination that got my mum through, which she wouldn't have done otherwise, and we could well have been taken into care.

I: As happened to the children of many other war widows.

R: Yes, absolutely, quite right too. I mean, in fact, my Uncle Ronnie, the one with thirteen children, although one died, twelve children, his – I only found this out very recently – that his wife, after the child, one of her children died. It was a cot death. It was awful. She had a nervous breakdown. And the youngest children, the older ones they were adults, all could cope. The younger members of the family all had to go into care. I didn't know that. They had to go into care for several months, if not a year. And I only found that out a few weeks ago, when one of them was talking to me. Now he's a professor at a university. [Laughter.]

I: It's funny how those stories get buried, sometimes.

R: Yes.

I: Then I suppose, that's what we don't want to happen with stories like yours and many others.

R: Yes, I mean, I read a book recently, called *The Throwaway Children*, about children who were, post-war, taken into care and sent to Australia. That could have happened to us, easily, if it hadn't have been for my mum, you know. That's why she was so frightened of it all the time, "You're going to be taken into a home," you know, in brackets, if I break down and can't cope.

I: But, of course, she did.

R: Yes, she certainly did. She certainly did, yes. I'm very proud of her.

I: I imagine so.

R: Yes. Now, I am and, well, obviously, since I've been an adult. But as a child, I mean, you don't, I don't think you think of being proud of your parents, you just, you're a child, you know. Your parent is there and that parent looks after you and protects you, and you don't think about being proud of them until you look back and think, "God! How did they do that?"

I: And, of course, your mother managed to raise you, was able to take care of her mother, her aunt.

R: Yes.

I: But at the same time, she also achieved an awful lot for other war widows.

R: She did, yes.

Well, I think she'd be, she would be very disappointed if the War Widows' [Association] did, you know, crumble and turn into an organisation which didn't have a future. Because she and those other founder members worked so hard. I mean, it took over their lives for so many years, and it was their crowning achievement, actually, that's what it was. And they received, you know, they were OBEs or MBEs, most of them, but they were recognised nationally for what they did. And maybe other younger war widows would have no idea of that history. It's an organisation that they've joined and they wouldn't know about that. I mean, when you join an organisation, when you're older, you don't necessarily know what's gone before, do you?

I: About the history …

R: No, no. You wouldn't know that there were all those struggling young women bringing up families and, you know, nearly killing themselves to create this organisation of which they're now members. But they joined it because they've maybe witnessed a similar happening, and they maybe wouldn't have a clue about the history of it – unless they were interested.

I: Ruth, you said that just a week or so before your mother passed away, she mentioned your dad's box again. Can I ask you what was in that box?

R: Yes. It was something extremely interesting in that box, actually, that I didn't know about. Well, mostly in the box there was stuff that, there was his joining-up papers, his leaving school certificates, some correspondence that Mum had with various people who sent her information about the Death March. There were some newspaper cuttings because Mum was interviewed by one or two newspapers, I just, oh God, I can't remember, it was some years ago. It was an anniversary of World War Two and she was interviewed by the Daily Telegraph.

There's bits and bobs in there, not much else, if I can remember. A pair of glasses in there, which must have been his. Of course, I don't know who else they would have belonged to. There's little epaulettes from his uniform, Royal Artillery epaulettes, which I've given to my son. Various bits of documentation articles.

Now, the most interesting thing that I found in that box, when I was going through it after she died, was two letters. They are in a very fragile state. Now, you remember that I mentioned to you that he had these two elderly aunts who lived in the Peabody Buildings, who spoke with Indian accents. We absolutely loved them. They were Alice and Leah, and then their sister was Ruth Blanche, who is my grandmother, and there was this fourth sister called Ellen Grace, who was born in 1883, or something like that, in India. They were all born in India, these four sisters.

During my research, I found most of the documentation concerning Alice, Leah – their birth certificates, their marriage certificates, and my grandmother. Including my grandmother's whereabouts, her grave in India, to which I've also been. I've been able to find out quite a lot about those three. But there's this fourth eldest daughter called Ellen Grace – never been able to find out anything at all about her, anything whatsoever, apart from her date of birth in India. And then the trail went absolutely cold. I tried to find out, of course, being a child when I knew Alice and Leah meant that I wasn't able to talk to them about any of this, so I didn't know there was a fourth sister. Or anything at all about her.

When I went through that box, there were these two old letters, and they were dated, Lucknow, 1931, 1930/31. And this woman, who is Ellen Grace, has answered a letter in response to a request from my father to find his birth certificate. Well, they were not birth certificates, they were baptismal certificates in those days, they were not birth… Because so many children died at birth, they didn't actually register them until they were baptised, perhaps when they realised they were actually going to survive. So they had a, it was a baptismal certificate he wanted. He wanted it because he'd left school and he was going to get a job in the Post Office, somewhere in India, in northern India, in a hill station.

So he'd got in touch… by this time, Leah and Alice had come to England because they'd married these soldiers and they'd returned to England. So Ellen Grace was the only sister left because his own mother had died. So, he's written to her to ask her, "Where is my baptismal certificate?" And she hasn't got a clue, because she says in the letter, "Well, my sister, his mother, took those little ones and put them in that school, in Orissa."

So she obviously disapproved. Well, she didn't offer to look after them, but she obviously, by the tone of the letter, disapproved of her sister putting her three children in an orphanage. So she didn't know where the baptismal certificate was. But she had a few ideas, and she said that she would try to locate it.

So she's written a couple of letters to various people, the clergyman, to try to track this baptismal certificate down. And I swear, I have never seen those letters before. I don't know how many times Mum looked through that box, and I have looked through that box before, I've never seen those letters before. And those are the only evidence I have of his Aunt Ellen, as she was known, being alive. And she was in Lucknow in the 1930s, I assume, married to a soldier, because Lucknow is a garrison town, and wrote these letters. And she said at the end of one of them [said], "Yes, well, please let me know how my nephew does in his job in Mussoorie. I'd really like to know". She sounds quite officious.

But I can't trace what happened to her after that. And if Mum had have lived, we'd have gone through that box and I'd have said, "Oh God! Look, this is the fourth sister." So that's a mystery, I don't… yeah. It's just a box of bits and bobs that belonged to him, really, there's nothing much in there. But they were his, so that's all we have. Plus a few photographs that, we have photographs he took during his time as a soldier, some quite interesting old black and white photographs of India and him with his mates, you know, his colleagues, these soldiers, and him on a horse. And skulls in the desert, you know. [Laughter.] And probably a few of the prisoner of war camp, too. Just a random assortment of photographs of, nothing from his childhood or anything like that.

I: But still, your father's box.

R: Yes, that's right, yeah.

I: Ruth, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

R: I think we've probably covered as much ground as I can in this session. I mean, I'm sure there will be other things that I'll think, "Oh, I wish I'd told Nadine that." But there's loads of stuff, I mean, we could sit here for a week, probably. I think I've probably covered all the salient points and you've got a pretty good idea of what things were like.

There's one very little poignant thing that I remember; I didn't tell you, it's only just kind of sprung into my mind, about the day that my dad was buried. He's buried in Hampstead Cemetery, and when we were kids we used to go. Mum took us over there regularly. But Jean always said, "I could never get my, I could never understand, my father is buried here". She said, "I could never, when I was a child". She said, "I just used to look at the grave and think, 'That's a skeleton'". She always used to say that, "My dad is a skeleton". It sounds awfully macabre, but that's the only way she could relate.

Anyway, the day of the funeral, my mum said she was going through the cemetery. It's a very big, you know, one of those urban, metropolitan, London cemeteries, it's huge. So they travelled down the main path in the car and she said she was looking out of the window, and she said this inscription on a grave that they passed caught her imagination. And she thought, "I'm going to use that". It was only a sentence. She said, "I'm going to put that on Bill's grave when we get the stone laid, that's what I'm going to put." Because it was so, you know, it summed up what she was feeling at the time. So she did. And the sentence was, "I shall not leave thee comfortless." Which is, you know, it's beautiful, isn't it? So that's what's written on, that's the inscription on his grave.

And she said, for years afterwards, years and years afterwards, especially when we used to go to the grave, regularly, as children, she said, “I looked for that inscription and I never found it.” And I have looked for it, and we’ve never found it. And I just thought, “Well, how did that happen?”

I: That’s what's on your father’s grave?

R: Yes, that’s what's on his grave. And Mum didn’t want to be buried, she said she wanted to be cremated, she thought it was better. Although, I think, believe the grave is an actual double grave, but anyway, she said she wanted to be cremated and have her ashes interred. So that’s what we’ve done. We’ve interred her ashes at the side of his grave and put an extra bit on top. It’s very plain because it was all she could afford, it’s just a plain slab, so there was room on the top to put an extra small slab with her details on it. But it was quite uncanny that, because no-one has been able to find that inscription. But yet, she swears she saw it, looking out of the window.

Fig. 1: Ruth Maxwell with a photograph of her mother, Joyce Mary Maxwell. 8 May 2017.

Fig. 2: Joyce and William at their engagement. 1945.

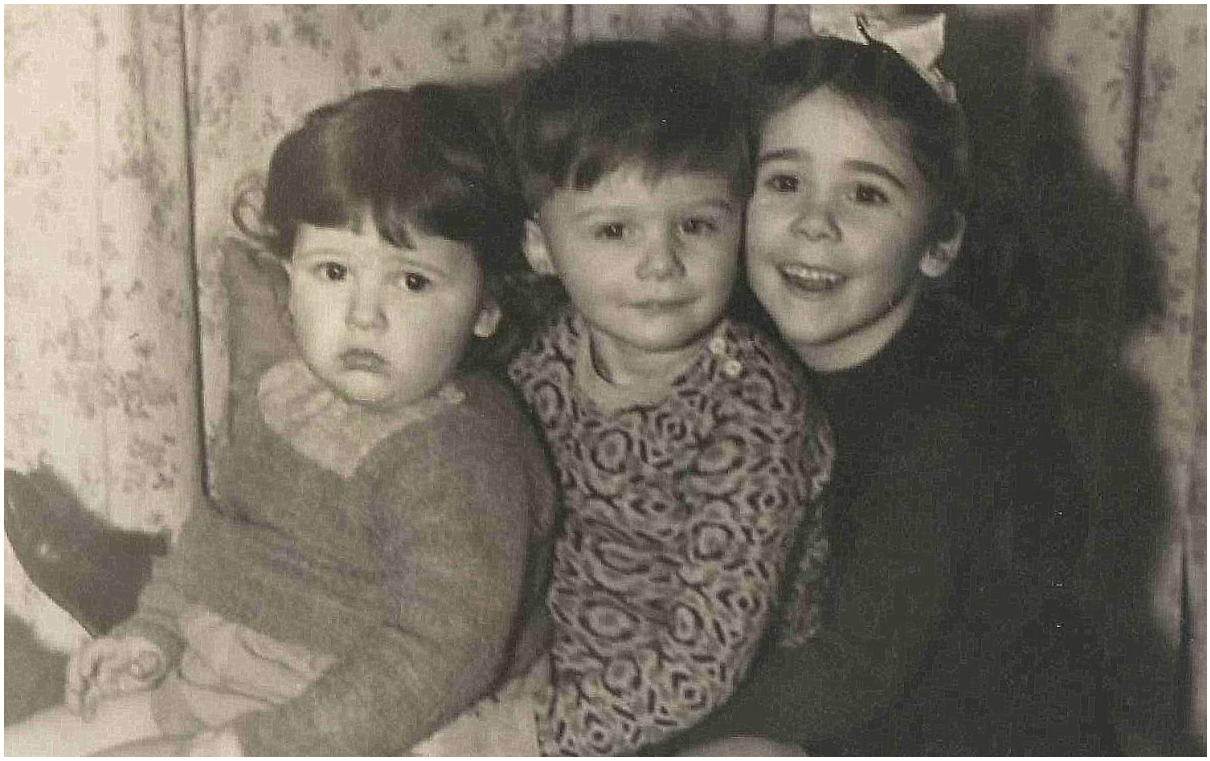

Fig. 3: Ruth (right) and her two siblings: Jean (left) and David (middle). 1951.

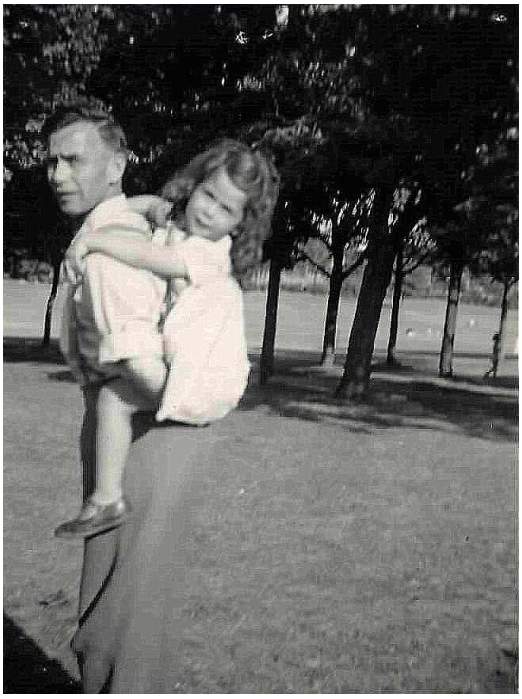

Fig. 4: Ruth and her father. 1949.

Fig. 5: Joyce Mary Maxwell (second from right) receives her MBE at Buckingham Palace, accompanied by her three children, including Ruth (left). 1997.