

CHAPTER 2

Origins



A mass of people in Fleet Street in the 1920s, looking east. There's an apple seller with a barrow in the foreground, and there are still many horse-drawn vehicles.

My father had been an officer on a merchant vessel, but now worked in town. He wore a black jacket and pinstripe trousers, would do a kind of boulevardio swing with his umbrella as he walked home from Highgate station. But he always preferred the sea, and in 1939 before war broke out made the fateful decision to go back.

I want in this chapter to look at the family background of our hundred or so contributors. About one in five has parents who arrived in England between 1850 and 1914, most but not all of them Jewish. About one in ten was born abroad, and arrived in England just before, or at the very end of, World War II. The struggles they endured before they arrived here have a separate chapter. In many ways our early lives are determined by our grandparents, which is where we'll start. Often they provide added childcare support, and often tight bonds develop. That phenomenon reduces for those of us born after the war as extended families became more dispersed, but there seems to be evidence that it's returning, particularly in families of recent immigrants.

It has been estimated that in 1900 the 'working' class comprised a little over 80% of the population. The definition varies, but the most common in that period is one that includes all who have nothing to sell but their labour and skills. Later the definition blurs, but it soon became clear that the grandparents of over 90% of our informants were working class.

Nanny Duggan's husband had no job in World War I and jumped off Tower Bridge.

My father's father was a shoemaker, and I remember boot hooks in the house.

My grandmother had begun life as a chambermaid at the Winchester, and later became a successful publican of the Birkbeck, on the corner of Holmesdale Road and Archway. It was more upmarket than the Woodman, which was definitely for manual workers. The Winchester pub catered for both communities.

After my mother's mother died her father broke down and was sent to an asylum, and the children went to an orphanage. They were cruel there. Once my mother got infected chilblains, which the nurse told her to keep covered. The supervisor unwrapped the bandages and caned her hands, on the chilblains. Her father wasn't released from the asylum until she got married.

Grandma Stick was my father's mother, one of only three of 13 children to survive. She worried about a carcinoma, had a breakdown, made suicide attempts, and eventually was put in a padded cell in Bethnal Green asylum before being transferred to Bexley. We would visit in turns. I loved it, spending time playing on the heath.

The Bethnal Green asylum, which opened as early as 1727, was notorious in the early 19th century for the appalling conditions in which the inmates lived, but by the early 20th century had largely cleaned up its act. Bethnal Green library used to be one of its buildings. Bexley, or the 'Heath' asylum, which was opened in 1898 and closed in 2002, was the seventh London asylum to be built, and was operated on more humane lines. It had a fully functioning farm and market garden, where many of the patients worked. It closed in 2002 and was demolished for housing, though the chapel still remains, as a gym.

Grandfather was a shoemaker. He told me he was a Druid. At one time he whitened shirts, collars and cuffs for the unemployed, so they would be presentable at interview. 'Could you whiten my cuffs?' Cuffs, note, not sleeves.