

CHAPTER 5

Life at Home



A family around the kitchen table just after the war.

My father would bring a tea tray up in the morning, with the cups stacked on top of each other, singing all the way up – or yodelling, or whistling, or doing bird songs. They'd lie in bed singing their way through *The Gondoliers*.

The typical parents of our informants would have been born before World War I. Many were old enough to have fought in it, and most would have had family members or friends who died, and if not in the war then in the terrible flu epidemic that immediately followed it. Those who survived the war would have had nothing equivalent to our post-trauma counselling. They just had to get on with it. Not many women worked between the wars, and they had little in the way of labour-saving devices in the home. Few people were salaried, and money arrived on Friday nights in the man's weekly pay packet, an envelope of cash that would be split into her housekeeping and his spending money. Moreover the six-year Depression that immediately followed the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 suppressed wages and left many out of work.

In 1926 the average wage was about £160 a year, much as it had been at the end of World War I, but by 1933 it was down to only a little above £140. So most households had to get by on £3 a week, about £150 in today's money, less than £8000 a year. In 1933 unemployment reached 3m, over 20% of the working population; and unemployment benefit, already low, had been cut further. Holidays were a rarity beyond the occasional day at the seaside, and hardly anyone had a car, so almost every child could and did play in the streets in safety. Some households had a radio, which arrived with the BBC in 1922 and gradually increased its output to nearly 14 hours a day in 1939, 10.15am to midnight; the war brought the first broadcast forward to 7am. But for many the only form of entertainment was outside the home, in the cinema, silent until 1927, and increasingly popular in the 1930s – 20m cinema visits were made each week in 1939, a figure that increased to 30m in 1947 before it started to fall away. The current figure is about 4m a week.

It was in an era when there was little or no money around. Wages were low, and we had to find money for the most important things.

Before the war our extended Jewish family members all lived in the same neighbourhood. My uncle came to play our piano on Sunday mornings. But the war dispersed them, and it was never the same after.

My parents began their married lives frugally, and stayed that way, living a simple life, and without any extravagant holidays. I have the same instinct.

My dad was a hardworking man but for many years had no work, so my mother was forced to accept charity. I can still see the white coupons for bread, meat and coal. We children also used to rely on charity for our clothes. I remember how ashamed I was of being poor. In those days there was little money to spare for most families but we were the worst off. I was ashamed then, but as I got older I was glad as it made me more understanding of those in a similar plight in those and these days. We had no toys or nice clothes, but we were rich in love and companionship. It was our parents who suffered most but as I look back on those poverty-stricken days I remember more than anything the love and fun and happy memories we children had.

We were extraordinarily poor. Our clothes were bought with Providence cheques, only usable in certain shops. Mostly we wore hand-me-downs, usually too big to start with.