

Introduction

It didn't take me long after joining the North London branch of the U3A, the University of the Third Age, to realise what a storehouse of memories its members had. Most were over 70, and many still had recollections of life before World War II. At the beginning of 2014 I was chatting after a lecture to a fellow member, and learnt that he'd arrived in England from Germany in 1939, a Jewish boy of nine. He was now 85. I asked him what it was like to have to learn a new language at that age in such traumatic circumstances, and he told me he couldn't really remember. It had come so easily, he said. He had no trace of an accent, his surname had been anglicised, and there was no indication that he hadn't been born and brought up in a London suburb. And his was just one of many lives defined by the effects of war – unremarkable people concealing remarkable stories.

There are many books about growing up in wartime Britain, and in London in particular, but they tend to limit themselves to the impact of the war itself. I found myself wondering what it was like to grow up before, during and after such a war, through danger, deprivation and disrupted schooling, often away from home and parents. And how 'normal' was life afterwards: starting a working life as a teenager, doing national service, planning a life? I wondered if there was enough material for a book about the period that would be based on personal testimony. In not much more than ten years' time the opportunity would be gone, so I set about interviewing members of the nearly 40 U3A organisations in the London area.

During 2014 I listened to over a hundred people born between 1920 and 1939 as they talked about their early lives up to the age of 21, almost all of them U3A members. Some had already written about their early lives, very often simply aimed at enlightening their grandchildren, material rarely published. Most had little intention of writing until triggered by U3A creative writing groups. The book is not exclusively about growing up in London, because I'm interested in how they coped wherever circumstances took them. About 60% were evacuated at least once during the war. Most were in London at some point during the first London Blitz, from September 1940 to May 1941, and the second, from June 1944 to March 1945. About a dozen originated abroad, and came here as refugees either before or after the war, and in one case during it, and I relate their back stories. The word 'Refugee' has acquired an unjustified connotation in the last few years. Our refugees came to London because it was a refuge. If they hadn't come, most would have been dead by 1945, and they have enriched our lives, as refugees continue to do.

Clearly our contributors cannot possibly be described as a cross-section of Londoners born between the wars. They're a self-selecting subset of older U3A members across the whole of the London area, from Ealing to Bromley,

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Wimbledon to Waltham Forest. And U3A members are themselves a subset of the older population, made up of those who want to keep themselves mentally active when they've retired from a working life that usually began soon after the end of World War II, and in some cases during it. The U3A attracts a disproportionate number of women, so the ratio of women interviewees to men is about 60:40, and I reached that ratio only by setting out to restrict the search to men towards the end of the interview phase. There's a higher proportion of people of Jewish origin in the U3A than in the population as a whole: there are about 20 in our group. But the ratio between 'working' and 'middle' class families in which our informants grew up does seem about the same as in the general population between the wars, about 80:20, by most definitions.

I've tried to ensure that as far as possible the memories can speak for themselves, and I employ the minimum amount of narrative. The book is aimed at three generations – those over 75, their children, and their children's children. The first two have either lived through, or been told about at first-hand, the background events that led to World War II and its outcome, and shaped the years of reconstruction that followed. The third group, whose grandparents or those of their generation are the contributors, may know only the bare minimum. The narrative has been designed to fill them in on the essentials. For those who'd like to probe further, rather than a mass of footnotes and a substantial bibliography, I have appended a set of chapter notes. These days, so pervasive is the Internet and its search engines and history websites, that these notes consist largely of pointers to websites that will answer questions that the reminiscences will provoke, as well as itemise useful written sources.

A word about the U3A, the University of the Third Age. It was founded in 1981 by three people: Eric Midwinter, Peter Laslett and Michael Young. It provides at a small annual cost the opportunity for those of any age, but normally those over 60 who have retired from full-time work, to learn about topics that their busy lives have prevented them from studying. It's a self-help organisation. Those who can speak a language, for example, run sessions of conversation or literature study. Those with an interest in theatre will arrange playreadings and outings. Each of the 40 or so U3As in the London region has between 30 and 100 groups catering for a huge range of interests in the Arts and Sciences. Look at any of the U3A websites to see what they have to offer. My own has 700 members and over 100 groups exploring a wide range of topics. If you haven't heard of the U3A, you have now, and there is sure to be one in your area. Check it out. And if you have heard of the U3A, why haven't you already joined?!

Peter Cox, London, August 2015.