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Oral History-Alina Sherman

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HIST 155, FALL 2015 / Professor Erskine

Student Interviewers Name: Alina Sherman

Interviewee Name: Vera Alosi

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions on October 23, 2015 and November 3, 2015 at Greenbrier Morning Pointe Assisted Living in Ooltewah, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Vera Alosi:

Vera Alosi, known as Vera Feather before she married, was born on May 30, 1927 in Manchester, England. At eighteen years old she met and married her husband, an American soldier, George Alosi. At nineteen years old, she moved to the United States with her husband and hasn't been back to England since. She has lived most of her life in Rhode Island where her and her husband raised their two sons, Arthur and Frederick. Growing up in London during the 1940's she experienced the London Blitz and was able to recall, in detail, her experiences. This interview was conducted on November 3, 2015 at her residence, Morning Pointe, in Ooltewah, TN.

Interviewer: Alina Sherman (AS)

Interviewee: Vera Alosi (VA)

AS: Mrs. Alosi, just to get started tell me a little bit about what life was like for you and your family before the London Blitz started?

VA: Well, growing up my family was very close. My father was a tool maker and my mother didn't work. My sister Irene was four years older than me and we got along quite well, while my older brother Jeffery had already enlisted in WWII before the Blitz began. I also had a younger brother who was born during the Blitz.

AS: How old were you when the London Blitz first started on September 7, 1940?

VA: Well, I was born in 1927 so I was thirteen when it first started.

AS: As a thirteen year old what was your understanding of what was happening at the time?

VA: Well, being a girl I was very scared, you know. And right away they started dropping the bombs on us and that was really scary. I was kind of a scared type. But then we kinda got used to it and I figure oh well, we got men here and they're going to fight. It was scary because if you weren't lucky the bombs would demolish your house. We lived in a neighborhood full of duplexes and a bomb dropped (starts counting) right on a duplex about six houses away from us. Our house was brick and got a big crack in it and I remember my father looking at it and saying 'I'll patch this up and get rid of this bugger!'

(chuckles loudly) A little while later after I had left for America they moved to a different house. I never lived in the new house and not long later they decided to come and live in America.

AS: I've read several articles that have said that the London Blitz had been expected for over 12 months, were you and your family are and what did you do in preparation?

VA: You couldn't show any lights so my father made these frames and at night you'd put them in the windows. And since you couldn't show any light it had to fit perfectly. I remember one night there was a raid and we were hiding under the kitchen table and there was a window right in front of the table. A bomb dropped nearby and the frame fell right out of the window but we thought we'd gotten hit but it was just the frame crashing on the floor. A lot of destruction happened during those air raids. People were killed inside their houses so they wanted you to leave your house and head to the underground shelters.

AS: Did you and your family ever stay in an Anderson or Morrison shelter? If so what was your experience like?

VA: Oh yes, we went to those shelters but all of our neighbors got together and we built one. They dug one underground and even put seats in it but the only problem was that after they finished digging it the darn thing filled up with water. We still went in it but when you got down you had to sit down and keep your feet up or they'd be sitting in water. So we all sat there like this (demonstrates how she sat in the shelter with her knees tucked under her chin in a fetal position.)

AS: How long would you guys sit in those shelters?

VA: Just depends on the raid. Generally an hour or so. Whatever time they were bombing. When they stopped we'd come out. Then they built, the city built brick above ground shelters. They actually built one right next to our house because we had an empty lot. Since we lived right next to the shelter they gave my mother the key. I remember one night my mother couldn't find the key and there were people banging on the door yelling 'Mrs. Feather! Find the key! We gotta go in the shelter!' and she'd yell back 'I can't find the key!' She finally found it and we were able to go into the shelter. I remember once it got very hot and my mother always use to tell this story (chuckles), I was tired so I laid down on the floor and everyone was getting up so they were taking off their coats and throwing them on top of me on the floor. She said I was on the bottom of piles of coats.

AS: Did they not see you there?

VA: They knew I was there but I guess they figured they were hot and they needed a place to put their coats (chuckles) I'll never forget that time.

AS: Leading up to the Blitz what was your daily routine like?

VA: Well I was about thirteen when before the Blitz started and I remember going to school but you had to take a gas mask with you because they were expecting Germany to gas us. So we had to take the gas mask to school every day and if you forgot your mask and you got to school and didn't have it you'd have to go to the principal's office and they'd give you one for the day but they'd give you a talking to. Saying 'It better not happen again!' We never did have a raid where we had to use it. But they'd come around to inspect them. My family would just throw our mask under the stairs where we kept our shoes and they came to inspect us saying 'Gas Masks! Gas Mask Inspection!' And my family would say, 'Oh dear where are they?' And we'd have to drag them out from under the stairs and the inspectors are going like this (covers nose) in disgust. They dropped bombs but we were never gassed.

AS: How was your family able to stay so calm throughout it all?

VA: We just accepted it but I didn't realize during the time that the Germans were about to invade England and had they done so we would have been done. We would have been done for because they had invaded other small countries and killed all the people living there. I saw a movie the other day and I said 'Oh my God, I didn't realize that all that went on,' I wish I could remember what the movie was called but it was the only movie I've seen that ever made me realize how bad it really was during WWII. Pearl Harbor saved us because America, you can't blame them, didn't want to get involved in the war. You know, they had no reason to enter the war. I mean they felt bad but when people as you why you're going to war they wouldn't have been able to. They didn't know us. I mean who wants to go to war.

AS: What was your view towards Americans before they got involved in the war?

VA: Well my brother was in the service in America before the Blitz happened and he loved it here. He loved America. He was happy when he came back to London and saw that I had an American boyfriend. So eventually he came to the United States to live. I always liked Americans. I was intrigued by them.

AS: During the time of the Blitz did your family have a radio? Were you familiar with the popular American CNN reporter Edward Murrow?

VA: We had a radio but I don't recall that name. We probably heard about him though. I'm sure he would have been well known in London but since we were living in Manchester at the time I never heard of him.

AS: Mrs. Alosi can you tell me about the first air raid you experienced?

VA: I don't really remember the first one but they came fast. We were in shock. We didn't understand why they were doing this. We would listen to Churchill's broadcasts on the radio. I remember him saying 'We will never withdraw!' I remember he had a saying where he said, 'We will be strong, we will be vigilant, and we will never withdraw!' He was very passionate about the war.

AS: What was it like living right next to an air raid shelter?

VA: The raids were pretty frequent and whenever a siren would go off you were supposed to go into the shelter. But my sister and I hated going into the shelters. They were awful and cold. We would stay in bed (chuckles.) My mom would yell ‘Come on girls!’ and we’d say ‘Go on ahead were coming Mum!’ We’d stay in our warm beds and we could hear the air raid guard shouting ‘Anybody in there?’ And my sister and I would freeze and stay very quiet. Imagine getting up out of your warm bed in the middle of the night and going into a damp brick building. You’d get pneumonia! And I was not a healthy child. I was sickly. One time I had a boil in my ear and I got so rundown they put me in a special school for sick kids called Longford Park School. It was in the middle of a park. But here I am at 88 and I’m still here (laughs.) I stayed there quite a while and I came out when I went to high school.

AS: I remember you mentioning that your roundest brother was born during an air raid can you describe what that was like?

VA: Well I remember my mom had a towel wrapped around her headboard so that she could pull on it when she felt pain. There was a midwife there and I remember she looked at my older sister and me and she asked us how old we were and I said thirteen and my sister said sixteen and she looked at my sister and said ‘you can stay.’ I had to go upstairs to bed while my mother gave birth downstairs. Looking back now it actually was a frightening thing to be having a baby during an air raid but at the time I wasn’t worried about the war I was just excited to have a new brother. My father didn’t approve of the pregnancy and he made sure to let my mother know. But one day he woke up and he loved that little baby like he was the only person in the world.

AS: How long did you live in Manchester?

VA: I always lived in Manchester. I came to America in 1946 when I was nineteen. But while living in Manchester I worked at a wheel factory where they made all different types of wheels. It was very interesting. I worked in the office. Ever place my father went he wanted me to work there with him. He’d say “you gotta come work here!” So I ended up working at Ford Motor Company. I was sixteen when I was working there and it started out that it was so big in order for them to get their mail to the different sections of the factory they had people on a bicycle inside the factory to deliver mail. I was one of the people who would ride and deliver mail and I remember guys would whistle at me (laughs while imitating a whistle noise) and boy we thought we were it! We had this old air raid shelter but we actually used it as a place to hide mail if there was only a couple pieces of mail that way we wouldn’t have to ride back and forth (chuckles lightly.) If we ever got caught we would have been fired but we never did! So then one time the other girls working there were in the air raid shelter but I wasn’t in there and they got caught and they got fired (chuckles.) We never did that again.

AS: Can you describe what it was like when the London Blitz ended on May 21, 1941?

VA: Oh yeah there was parties everywhere! It was wonderful. Once the Americans came they really helped us. All the girls called the Americans the 'Yanks' they'd say, 'have you seen the Yanks?' Girls including myself would take a train ride just to see them. I don't know what we expected to see but we just wanted to see what they'd look like. We thought they were going to look different, it was so funny. I remember going on the train and one time I had a date with an American and one of my girlfriends said let's go dancing and leave your date. I went dancing with her instead of going on the date and I remember we were standing at the dance waiting for someone to ask us to dance when I felt somebody tapping me on the shoulder and when I turned around it was the guy I stood up (chuckles.) He said 'thanks a lot!' and I told him I didn't want to leave my girlfriend alone and he calmed down.

AS: During the Blitz I remember you saying you lived in a duplex were you close with your neighbors? Did you know of anyone that was directly hit?

VA: I can't remember anybody specifically that was hit. I didn't know of anyone personally that was killed but I knew a lot of people were affected due to the bombs.

AS: What did you and your family think about Germany during the Blitz?

VA: Oh yeah the Germans. We thought of them as like monsters. We couldn't understand why they would want to do this. I don't know why they did it or started it in the first place. My parents might of but they never explained it to us kids. All I knew was that America was our only hope of survival and thank God for the Americans.

AS: What was it like rationing food during the Blitz?

VA: You were only allowed one egg and if your egg happened to be bad you weren't allowed to get another one. All of the food was rationed. It was difficult adjusting to rationing but it just became normal. They would give us vouchers in order to pick up our food. When the Americans came they were not allowed to leave their camp and go to a British home without bringing food with them. It was nice because when I started dating my husband he would always bring food with him and the kids in my neighborhood they'd all wait for him to come and they'd say, 'Any gum chum?' (chuckles) they loved gum.

AS: Looking back what helped you stay so strong?

VA: At that time I never thought about how close we were to being invaded and the other countries that were. I never realized then but now looking back I can see how easily things could have been different. During the time I couldn't understand what we did to hurt them and why the Germans were choosing to attack us. We didn't do anything we were very quiet people.

AS: What a day it must have been when WWII ended. Can you remember what was happening around you when you found out?

VA: Ahh there were parties in the streets! Everybody was so happy. My parents were so excited. I couldn't believe the day we'd all been waiting for had finally come. That's a day I'll never forget.

Bibliography

I spent approximately 2 hours reading in preparation for the second interview.

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1. The London Blitz had been expected for over 12 months, what did you and your family do in preparation for it?
2. How old were you when the London Blitz first started on September 7, 1940?
3. What was your understanding of what was happening during the time?
4. What did your parents tell you?
5. Was any of your family separated during the Blitz?
6. What was your daily life like before the Blitz occurred?
7. Did your family own a radio, if so what things do you remember listening to?
8. Were you familiar with the CNN broadcast journalist Edward Murrow?
9. Can you describe the first air raid you experienced?
10. How frequently did you and your family go to air raid shelters?
11. Where was the closest air raid shelter to your house?
12. What was your experience like being in these Anderson or Morrison shelters?
13. During the first six weeks of the Blitz 16,000 London homes were destroyed, did you know of anyone in London that was affected?
14. Were you going to school before the Blitz started in 1940?
15. Before the Blitz happened what was your views towards Germany?
16. How did those views change once the Blitz occurred?
17. What were your views towards America while the London Blitz was happening?
18. Today, with fast food and so many cheap options, most of us can't imagine what it would be like to ration food. Can you describe what that was like?
19. How did you remain so strong during it all?
20. Can you describe the events happening around you when WWII ended?

