

Olive's Story

Barry York relates the special experience of interviewing his mother for the Library's Oral History Collection

To the researcher seeking source material on English immigrants to Australia in the 1950s, or economic conditions, social life and customs in north-west London or West Brunswick, Melbourne, a search of the National Library's catalogue will reveal an interview recorded with Olive York in 1992 and 1997. The interview is just one of thousands in the Library's Oral History Collection, yet to me it is the most precious. Olive York died in 2003. She was my mother.

Many of those who shared their life histories with me in interviews during the 1980s and 1990s are no longer with us. And while the deceased live on in the memories of loved ones and friends, their memories, spoken in their own words, also live on—thanks to the National Library.

Fortunately, the interview with my mother is a very good one, largely because of her capacity to think carefully and deeply, to recollect detail and talk keenly. As in any interview situation, the quality of outcome is largely determined by the amount of preparation undertaken by the interviewer, and their enthusiasm for the subject. On the other side, there is the willingness and capacity of the interviewee to have their story recorded. Trust is an essential ingredient in the dynamic interaction between the two parties, and again it was fortunate that my mother and I had a loyal and loving relationship. Out of both a sense of self, and of history, my mother appreciated the importance of the recording being made.

The Library's catalogue describes the recording as an 'Interview with Olive York, retired photographic assistant and English migrant', and accurately describes the contents as providing detail on working-class life in the home, cottage community and at work in the London suburb of West Hampstead during the 1920s–1940s,



emigration to Melbourne in 1954, settlement, working and home life in Brunswick, and my mother's position as lady mayoress of that city in 1972–73 and 1976–77.

My mother was born in London in 1916. Most of her life was spent in a cottage in a row built for railway workers in West Hampstead. Her paternal grandfather had been a railway plate-layer and was probably among the first residents when the Heysham Terrace (later Iverson Road) cottages were built by the Midland Railway Company in 1897. My mother's sister, my auntie Vida, resided there until her death in 1998. (A pity the family never owned the cottage, as today they are highly sought after by doctors, lawyers, academics, and successful artists and actors.)

My mother's wonderful eye for detail, her sharp intellect and excellent memory, shine throughout the interview. She was always attracted to distinctive personalities and felt compassion for people. The latter may have been born of her own difficult early years,

above left:
Olive York working at
Valentine's Studio, London
c.1933
Courtesy Barry York

above right:
Olive York as a child, with
neighbours, London c.1920
Courtesy Barry York



above:
 Loreto ('Larry') and Olive York
 with mayoral portrait c.1977
 Courtesy Barry York

below left:
 87 Shamrock Street,
 Brunswick 1966
 Courtesy Barry York

below right:
 Frank Hurley (1885–1962)
 Bourke Street, Melbourne
 between 1945 and 1955
 b&w acetate negative;
 11.8 x 16.4 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an22876176

especially the loss of her beloved father, Will Turner, when she was 10, and the subsequent poverty of her mother, Daisy (née Willmott), who worked as a domestic while raising three children. My mother's vivid accounts of family and community life exude great warmth and, rather than just reading the 257-page transcript, the recording itself really needs to be heard to fully appreciate this.

Here is an example:

We were better off than some of the other people living in the cottages [in the 1920s] and dad would even bring home a bottle of wine, port wine, Friday evenings. Payday was Friday ... and sometimes he would bring home a packet of 'Empire mixture' and there were all these different marzipan sweets and there was one strawberry in a packet and because everyone wanted the strawberry we would take it in turns...

My mother's work in the photographic industry spanned the years 1930 to 1971 and encompassed both London and Melbourne. I asked her many questions about the photographic trade. Today, her accounts of work in the 'dark room', developing negatives and printing photographs, sound like the 'dark ages': chemical mixing, dangerous fumes, an electrical shock that nearly killed her. She also worked as a re-toucher. In her time, the only way to correct an imperfection in a photograph was to physically remove it on the photo surface itself, using a very fine-pointed nib to scratch it away, and then, using an equally fine-pointed brush, to paint in the correction.

Living and working in London during World War II meant that Olive experienced the Blitz. Again, her accounts are graphic and, moreover, preserve the terminology of

the time. How many people know today why a 'Doodlebug' was such a fearsome thing?

I was on the way home, lunch break, and we had a Doodlebug, a V-bomb as they called them, but Doodlebug was the nickname for them, pilot-less aircraft, and this particular Doodlebug, this was the one that really scared me. I got outside in the street walking up Iverson Road from Dron's [photographic studio] and this blooming thing seemed to be following me. It was overhead and I thought: this has my number on it and this is the end of me. I want to get home and get with Mum ... at least we'll die together.

The interview is also an excellent source on English migration and adaptation to life in Melbourne. My father, Loreto (Larry), who had been stationed in England with the Royal Air Force, made the decision to migrate, mostly for my sake, as I had been badly affected by the London smog of 1952, which killed about 12 000 Londoners over five days. His brother, Joe Meilak, had migrated to Melbourne from Malta in 1925 and was a stevedore on the Melbourne wharves. Joe and his Australian wife, Daisy, nominated us, and we made the voyage as 'ten pound migrants' on the *Himalaya* in 1954.

The recording, which lasts for about 10 hours, provides insight into the subjective side of emigration; in my mother's case the doubts, and determination to return 'home' within two years. There are also elaborate accounts of the voyage itself. As well, the interview captures the strange reversals that occur in life. My mother immediately fell in love with Melbourne while my father, who had been so determined to migrate, couldn't stand the place!



The interview goes some way to exploding the mythology of Australia's 'Golden 1950s'. True, there was much factory work and overtime to be had, but accommodation was problematic. My mother recalls the difficult first couple of years:

In all, in the first 22 months in Australia we had seven different lodgings, because in that day children were not wanted, people who had any rooms to let did not want children, which is understandable now. We read newspaper adverts galore, rooms to let, and whenever we went there, 'Oh no, no children'.

One of the boarding houses, in West Brunswick, was particularly unpleasant:

It was called The Warren, because they housed people like rabbits: one family to every room. There were about six rooms and [the landlady] had a family in every room and she charged them up very well—you know, most of my wages went in paying the rent there. Always arguments, always having the police arriving, turning people out. I can hear her to this day saying, 'May God help you, may God help you!'; that was her answer to everything when these people were yelling at her.

My mother found a job at the Astra Bridal Photographic Studio in Sydney Road, Coburg, and my father worked in factories in the cosmetics industry. We eventually bought our first home in 1956, in Shamrock Street, West Brunswick. It was a weatherboard house at number 87. Thirteen years later we sold it and moved two doors up, to a brick-veneer, next to a factory, at number 83a.

My mother's story would have been a fairly ordinary piece of 'social history' were it not for the fact that in the 1970s my father was elected Mayor of Brunswick on two occasions. Active in the Storemen & Packers Union and the Labor Party, he was first elected to Brunswick Council in 1969. My mother's interview provides insights into the migrant working-class Brunswick community over a four-decade period from the 1950s, including her time as lady mayoress. It is interesting to have the perspective of the mayoress during the period. By this time, my mother had retired but my father, while mayor, continued to work in a factory.

Another notable aspect to the interview relates to suburban journalism. In 1976, as

mayoress, my mother started writing a regular column about local people and community activities for the *Brunswick Sentinel*. Her reports ran for 10 years.

The York family connection to Brunswick ended after my parents divorced in 1990, and the family home was sold in 1994. My mother talks frankly about the impact of divorce at such a late stage of life, offering another unusual and significant dimension to the interview.

In 1991 my father moved to Canberra, where I had settled four years earlier, and my mother followed suit in 1994. This transition is also discussed.

In previous *National Library of Australia News* articles and elsewhere, I have written and spoken about the intimacy of the human voice, and in preparing for this article I wondered how I would respond to hearing my mother's voice again. Bearing the accent of a refined working-class English lady, it naturally reflected the emotional highs and lows she was reliving through the interview. There was cheeriness, stoicism, and some tears. Yet, for me, listening to the recording was comforting. It made me feel as though she is not entirely gone.

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above:
Barry York
Larry and Olive York with a 1954 photo of the new arrivals 1996
Courtesy Barry York

below:
Scrapbook cutting of Olive York's column, *Brunswick Sentinel*, 5 July 1978
Courtesy Barry York

