

WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD



THIS ISSUE:

Lions at bedtime in Calcutta; cows to wake me in Kent

Naomi Pope grew up in Rangoon and Calcutta but spent her teenage years on an English farm, preparing to become a Zionist pioneer. In the first of a two-part feature, she tells **Bea Lewkowicz** about swapping nannies and tiffins for a life of mucking out the cows

Naomi Pope has had a remarkable 90 years, with much of her early life spanning the major events of the 20th century. She was born Naomi Mariano in 1929 in Rangoon, Burma into a family whose roots were unknown but probably reached back to Spain, Portugal or Italy, rather than Baghdad – the background of most of Rangoon's Jews.

Her grandfather Victor owned the Rangoon Gazette and was married several times – her grandmother was his third wife after the first two died in childbirth. Her

father, Joseph, studied medicine at Trinity College, Dublin, and at the outbreak of World War I, volunteered for the army. He was wounded and recuperating in Croydon when he met and fell in love with Sarah Roth, a volunteer who was helping change his bandages. They married on 19 December 1918. Joseph spent one night with his new wife before boarding a boat for the eight-week voyage back to Burma. By the time he arrived, Sarah was pregnant with the couple's first child, Frida. When Frida was 12 months old, Sarah left Britain

for Burma.

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Could you tell me about life in Burma?

NAOMI POPE: My grandfather had given each of his 16 children a house on the same street. In the evening, the children would all sit on the veranda. When my mother came to Burma she met this large family and loved it.

There were about 500 Jewish families in Rangoon. They had a harmonious relationship with the Muslim community, sharing kosher meat with the 'Muhammedans' (as we called them).

Baghdadi Jews wore loose gowns down to the ground and baggy trousers called Shan Bombays. My mother never wore these. Everybody has told me how they loved her dresses and copied her hats.

I remember a synagogue full of people laughing and dancing. I think it was on Simchat Torah. Everyone had water pistols and hoses and drenched each other.

When I was six I went to a convent school with my sister Frida. Every lunchtime our car would come. In the back our nanny had laid a small table with a

white cloth and food from a tiffin carrier, and Frida and I would sit and have our lunch. And then she put it all away, wiped our hands and we went back to school.

We ate with the nannies and I didn't see much of my parents except when they came to kiss us goodnight. They had a rich social life and went out almost every evening. When I dressed, the nanny would drape my clothes around me. I couldn't do buttons up. It was all done for me.

Every two or three years we went to England to see the family. In 1934, the whole family travelled around the world with the nanny and a driver. We went all over America, Japan, China and England.

Our position in society must have been strange because my mother was European and my father wasn't. But he was accepted because of his job as a journalist on the Rangoon Gazette, and because of the kind of man he was. But there were government events he wasn't invited to.

When I was seven we moved to Calcutta, where my father worked for The Statesman.

BL: What was life like in Calcutta?

NP: It was exciting. We lived in Canani Mansions on Upper First Street. Our neighbours were Canadian missionaries. We lived opposite the zoo, so every night I went to sleep accompanied by the trumpeting of elephants and roaring of lions. I remember thinking I might wake up and find a huge animal in my room. But when we left I missed the noises of the night.

BL: How did you leave India?

NP: In 1939 my mother, Frida, David (my brother) and I boarded a ship in Calcutta. I played with the children of the British soldiers onboard. For the first time I realised I wasn't one of them because I was Jewish. The war was hanging over the conversation all the time. My mother was very anxious.

I remember the day we docked in Liverpool. We were supposed to go back to Calcutta after the summer but the boat wouldn't take us because my brother or I had measles or chickenpox. That boat was then torpedoed in the English Channel. It was a sign that we were not to go back.

We went to stay at East Cliff Manor in Bournemouth and my brother and I went to school there. We lived in a hotel and stayed there until the money started running out.

My mother took a house in Bournemouth and did the most ghastly cooking. She'd get her meat ration and put

it in water, cook it for half an hour and give it to us. We used to drop it for the cat to eat.

My brother and I walked three miles to a synagogue in Bournemouth every Shabbat and then went on Sunday for Hebrew lessons. We didn't like it, but I won a prize for Hebrew because in Calcutta we had had private lessons.

BL: When did your father join you?

NP: In 1940 he went to Nova Scotia and the Cape of Good Hope and other places, where there were convoys to pick up people. There were lots of little boats that did this sort of thing and were protected by warships. Even then, some of them got bombed. He eventually arrived in 1941.

My brother and I went to meet him. It was lovely when he arrived. He went back and forth to London, trying to find work. Eventually he got a job in His Majesty's Stationery Office and my parents found lodgings in Ealing. It was a big comedown from the homes we had lived in, but my mother didn't make a fuss. My sister joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service, I got a scholarship to Ealing School of Arts and my brother went to a private school.

BL: How did the war affect your lives?

NP: My brother became nervous. We lived at the top of the house. You'd look out the window and see the doodlebugs coming. They'd stop very close and you knew they would dive down.

I was in the Habonim youth movement, which I had joined in Calcutta. Habonim evacuated whoever wanted to go and David and I went to Manchester. It was lovely, even though we were moved to a different house three times because my brother was naughty. We stayed a few months until the doodlebug scare was over. We had just moved to another house, where David met a boy his own age who was keen on chemistry. They jelled and David eventually went to London University to do geology.

BL: How would you describe Habonim?

NP: It fired me like a rocket. It was a cycle from Ealing to Shepherd's Bush to go to a meeting and I was only 12. I'm shocked my parents allowed it. We would talk about Israel and plan how we were going to get



Left: Naomi Mariano as a young girl in Rangoon, Burma, 1935

there. Every moment after school I would go to meetings. I remember going to a house in

Hampstead. An air raid was on, and there were about 30 of us in a room sitting on the floor, chandeliers shaking with the bombs going off. Beethoven's Fifth was playing. I was transfixed.

When I got back to London from Manchester I wanted to go on 'hachshara' (agricultural training on a farm in preparation for going to Israel) but I was only 14. My parents said it was out of the question. I tried the next year and I was just as fervent, so my parents said, 'Oh, well, let her go.'

BL: What was life like at the farm?

NP: The David Eder training farm was in Harrietsham, Kent. To get there, I had to walk up a huge hill with my case but it didn't deter me. Everybody on the farm was about 20. But I came in 1944, just before my 16th birthday.

There were about 40 'chaverim' (comrades). We all had jobs, taking turns in the kitchen and so on, as well as a day job – most of the chaverim went out to work on neighbouring farms. Because I was under 18, I was kept behind, which was a great pity because I was dying to go out with everybody else. I had to get up at 4am and cook the meals, and cross the fields at night to look after the new chickens. It was hard work but I loved it.

I shared a room with two other girls. There was no electricity or gas. You were issued with underwear, a shirt and dungarees. On Friday we were given a better kind of blouse and skirt for the weekend. The beautiful clothes that my mother had packed went straight into the communal place. We wore boots that had been passed from one person to another.

Our meat was sent from a kosher butcher called Barnet in Petticoat Lane. Every Thursday Barnet put a cardboard box on the train to Harrietsham, where it was picked up and taken to the farm.

I hitchhiked home every three months and spent a couple of days with my parents.

When the war ended everybody went to Trafalgar Square but the cows had to be milked and chickens fed. So I stayed behind to do that. ■

Find out what happens to Naomi when she joins her comrades aboard the Exodus 1947 en route to Palestine in the January issue of JR. This is an excerpt based on an interview in the Sephardi Voices UK Archive. See: sephardivoices.org.uk.