

Oral History of Patricia Diacono

My name's Phillip John Diacono, and I'm interviewing my mother Patricia Maria Diacono on Monday the 27th of August 2001 at her home at Elanora Heights in Sydney, Australia. Can you give me your full name, and your date of birth and place of birth.

Hello, my full name is Patricia Maria Diacono and I was born on the 2nd of January 1927 at Waverley [Sydney, Australia] and I was born at home - most people in those days were born at home - and I was the second youngest of nine children.

What were the full names of your parents?

Arthur Francis O'Leary and Gladys Frances De La Haye

Do you know how your Mum spelled her surname?

Yes, capital D e capital L a capital H a y e

So three separate words.

Yes, it was French. She was known as Fan.

So both your parents had Frances as their middle names.

Yes, but she was called Fanny.

What's a little bit you know about your parents, where did they come from, where were they brought up, that sort of thing.

Dad come from Ireland, just before he was born, his parents went to England, so he was born in England. My mother was born in New Zealand.

Do you know what part?

I think it was Wellington.

What did her parents do.

Her father was a jail warder - they weren't called Jail Warders in those days, I'll let you know later on. Her mother, she was at home.

What brought them over to Australia?

My Mum and her sisters - her father and mother had died - and Mum and her sisters and brothers came over to Australia.

Do you know anything about your Dad's family.

Yes, Dad was born in England, and then his father was suffering from TB, and they decided to come to Australia because of the weather, and he was a builder, Dad's father, and he invested his money with some chap in Sydney. On the voyage over, he died of galloping consumption, it was called. So my grandmother landed with two little boys. And when they arrived, the chap that he'd invested his money in had disappeared, he'd embezzled all his money, so she was stranded here. She probably had to go to work, because there was no such thing as social service, so she battled on and my Dad joined to become a Brother after he left school, and he studied up at St Mary's Cathedral at the Chapel, and I guess after a few years, he decided he wasn't cut out to be a Christian Brother, so he left and got a job at Gibson and Battles, an engineering company [Gibson, Battle & Company Ltd], and he was a clerk there. Then he met my Mum.

Do you know anything about that meeting?

No, I don't. They got married.

Do you know where they got married?

At Edgecliff, a little church at Edgecliff.

Were they living there at the time?

I don't know, I've got no idea. I found out years later, that Mum wasn't a Catholic, I never knew it. I think she changed, I'm not quite sure, but she always went to mass and everything like that. Because Dad's mother and his brother lived in Dowling St and my

grandmother used to go to mass each day at St Columbkilles in Woolloomooloo. She was a little tiny old lady with a long black skirt and she had very bad eyesight. She always had the rosary beads in her hand. My uncle Con, Dad's brother, used to look after her.

Do you remember any of your grandparents?

I just remember her and Uncle Con, but the others, no, they were dead

Had your mother's parents had died?

Yes.

What do you remember about your grandmother?

Just a little old lady, in a long black skirt, always had the rosary beads in her hand, went to mass every day, even when she could barely see and she died at the age of, she was over ninety when she died. That's about all I can remember - she died before my father and I think he died in March, and she died on the shortest day of the year, which was June.

She died after your father

Yes, I think the shock killed her.

Do you know what year that was?

Dad died when I was eleven, so that was 63 years ago [1938], I was eleven.

What do remember of the circumstances of your Dad dieing?

Oh well, my mother died ... they decided to move to Brougham St, [Kings Cross, Sydney] from Lidcombe. At that time they had gone to Lidcombe, where my brother Denny was born, from Waverley.

Do you remember the address?

No but [my brother] Vince would. They decided to move next door to number 60 Brougham St because my aunties and uncles lived next door in number 62.

Your uncle Con?

No he lived in [140] Dowling St, you know, where Vince and Mary used to live. That was Aunty Alice and Aunty Blanch and Uncle Carl and Uncle Jim. They were over from New Zealand and all spinsters and bachelors, none of them married.

That's unusual.

Yes. They lived at 62 Brougham St and decided it would be much better for Mum to live close by, so they could give her a hand with the eight. There were eight children, one died at childbirth, and the youngest was two, and I think the eldest was 18 or 19.

Do you recall how old you were when you moved to Brougham St.

Well, we arrived there when Denny was two and I was four. You know those little steps up to the backyard, I can remember Denny and I going up the steps and jumping off that wall, as plain as can be. So we were only there a short time ...

Was your Mum still alive?

Yes, and then she died, she caught pneumonia and she died.

That would have been right smack in the middle of the Great Depression, 1931. Was your Dad affected?

No he worked but my brothers were taking a long while to get a job. They used to walk everywhere. We were lucky to have a house because a lot of people lived in the Domain, it was terrible.

and did you own the house or just rent it.

No, no one owned, working class people didn't own houses. That's why they rented, they moved from place to place, they were always sort of moving, like the rents were cheap, so it must have been cheap to move because ...

they didn't have a lot of possessions

Well that's it, yeah, not like today. So we were only there about 6 months and Mum died.

What do you remember about that?

Well, they had ... I can remember they used to keep the body in a coffin in the front room, and they had all these people coming, and someone gave us, Denny and I, some lollies and I went into the front room and stretched up and saw my mother in the coffin, and um, [crying], and I started to cry and they said "What are you crying for?" and I said "Denny took my lollies" [laughs], that's all I can remember, you know. So crazy, kids, but anyway.

It must have been devastating for you.

They didn't tell you, you know, that she'd died or anything. When you come to look at it, you know, it's crazy.

So you must have been lost without a Mum

Yeah, there was, you know, Doreen and Eileen ... Doreen was 14 and Eileen was about 16. So after she died, Doreen sort of was in charge of the house but Aunty and them did the cooking and looked after us as well.

Which aunty was that?

Aunty Al, Alice. And Aunty Em, Emma, was there.

Did they move in from next door or just come from next door?

They used to just come and look after us and then that didn't work out. So, by then, Len had got married, the eldest. And Eileen.

Do you want to just go through all your siblings?

All right: Len was 16 years older than me and Eileen was 14 years older than me and Arthur about 12 years older, and Doreen, 10 years old; Stan was seven years older, and Vince was five years older and then there was me and Denny was two years younger than I was.

and you said there was another child ...

Yes, he was born between Doreen and Stan, and it was another boy, but he only lived a few hours. I don't know what his name was or anything.

What do you remember of your Mum?

She was really bright. I don't remember a great deal. I remember living at Lidcombe. She was nursing Denny, and all the kids were going out and playing in Lidcombe cemetery, it was only in the next street. And I was wanting to go with them and Mum was saying "All right, all right, you can go, but they've got to look after you" and I can remember on Friday nights the man across the road had a horse and sulky and occasionally I went with her and it was a shopping night, so we used to do the shopping.

On a horse and sulky!

Yes, [laughs], on a horse and sulky. And I can't remember much more about her. Just a couple of things, you know.

Were times hard?

Yeah, oh well, we always had food and a clean bed, so, you know, it wasn't too bad at all. Like, for us it wasn't, I know for the older ones, like we didn't have many clothes or anything, but we survived.

So your Mum dies in the middle of the Depression, of pneumonia. And you started school soon after that?

Yeah I was about six, you didn't start until you were about six, and I went to St Mary's Cathedral School

Where all of us went?

Yeah. And Denny went there as well.

What was your favourite subject at school.

I can always remember, I couldn't read, and all of a sudden - we were reading poetry - and I hated it, and all of a sudden, I could read.

It just clicked. And from then on, [chuckles], I was a reader. I can still remember it, it was just so good, I finally was able to read, I wasn't struggling. I must have been about seven or eight. You didn't learn to read in Kindergarten or anything.

And who were you taught by?

The nuns, the Sisters of Charity

And what were they like?

Pretty strict [chuckles], very strict, they used the ruler a lot. They'd come running up the aisle and give everyone a whack over the shoulders or if you played up, you'd have to go out and you'd get whacked on the hand with a cane. They didn't have straps they had canes.

And did you get detention and stuff like that?

No, no, don't be silly [laughs], we were tough.

And what did you used to play in the yard?

Skipping, playing ball, doing the maypole once a year, all ribbons, and you held on to the ribbons and did different dances and plaited the ribbon. You don't hear about it now. It was all concrete, the school yard and occasionally, very occasionally, you might go over to the Domain, which was just across the road, but very very rarely.

There wouldn't have been the Domain parking then?

No, no, it was just all park,

Was it just a hill?

it was flat and then it went down, near the [Woolloomooloo] wharves.

Did you have any clapping games or any things like that?

I can't remember, we might have, I don't think so.

Do you remember the names of any of your friends from Primary School?

There was Gladys, Ida, Doreen, Noreen, that's about it

Were they all from Woolloomooloo?

Yes, they all lived close to the school.

Would they have been Irish?

Most of them Catholic Irish families, there was a couple of Italians, not many, just a couple of girls whose parents were Italian - Ada Lorenzo, her father had a wine shop in William St [Kings Cross], six penny plonk.

Old flagons?

They used to go, there used to be a little room and you'd see all these people go in, they'd sit there and have a glass of plonk. They were real dives.

Because the main population drank in a pub and drank beer.

Yes, Yes, and women never went into a pub, or drank beer in a pub or anything like that, it was just the men.

What did you used to on weekends, when you weren't at school, did you have friends come and visit or did you visit them?

No, we weren't allowed to have friends, in the house. That was barred.

Why not?

I don't know, they just didn't like kids coming into the house.

Who would have made that rule, would it have been Aunty or would it have been your Dad?

Aunty maybe. It just wasn't done. Kids today, they sleep over. Oh no. But I had a girl friend up the street, Josie Camilleri, and I used to spend a lot of time playing with her and her brothers. We were really good friends.

She was of Maltese background.

Yes. Her parents were Maltese but she was born in Australia.

What did you think of the food they ate, did you ever get invited to dinner?

No. Oh great. Her mother was always cooking and she'd always give me a little taste, and I just loved it, because you didn't have that type of food.

What did you used to eat?

What we ate was mainly roast dinner, hoggett, older lamb, and mutton is the oldest lamb; corned beef with white sauce, cabbage, potatoes, and always sweets, rice custard, bread and butter pudding, and apple tarts. We had stews, lamb or beef stew. We had chops and sausages, but the kids only got sausages. The men, grown ups, got chops, and vegetables: carrots, and peas and beans.

What about fresh fruit?

Very little, occasionally. Christmas we used to get fresh fruit, lots of fruit. And the men, when we moved into 62, the men ate in the dining room, and the kids ate in the kitchen.

But there was hardly any room in the kitchen?

There was a kitchen table, oh yeah. We had a table in the kitchen, well in the room next to the kitchen, where we [Pat's husband and children] used to have our dining room; at one time they had the dining room where we had our lounge room. They didn't have a lounge room, they just had a dining room. And the front room was a bedroom.

and which was your bedroom?

well I shared a bed upstairs in the front room, on the balcony. Shared a bed with my aunty.

Shared a BED with your aunty?

Yeah, we all shared beds. There was 3 aunties.

Weren't they living in 62?

We'd moved into 62 after Mum died. About six months after, we moved into 62. There was 3 aunties, there was Doreen, myself and Denny. So there was six. There was the front room and the balcony.

So there was one adult and one kid in each bed?

Yeah, yeah. [laughs].

They would have just been single beds, wouldn't they?

Well there was one double, the kids slept at the bottom on the bed

sideways?

No, head to tail [laughs].

So you had your aunty's smelly feet in your nose?

Yeah [laughs]. Oh dear.

So on the balcony, that wouldn't have been closed in then?

No they had blinds, canvas blinds. No there was just the bed on the balcony, it was like a three quarter bed.

So in the winter, it would have been freezing?

It must have been [laughs]

And in the summer, you would have been eaten by mozzies?

Yeah

Who was in the middle bedroom.

There was the boys, Arthur and Stan, and Uncle Jim was in the back room and Uncle Carl was in the front room downstairs.

Len had moved out?

Len had got married, and Eileen had got married, so there was only six of us.

So in the middle room, there would have been Arthur and Stan and Vince.

No Vince lived with Grandma and Uncle Con. That was terrible, too, Grandma said: Oh we'll have one of them and poor Vince, he had to live with them in Dowling St.

Where he later grew up with his own family.

Yeah.

He was the only one?

They only wanted one.

Do you see him often?

Yeah, he used to come up and see us and everything, but it must have been very hard for him, because Grandma was old, and Uncle Carl, he was a old bachelor. Used to have cold showers every morning.

Why? Was there just no hot water?

No, so he had cold showers. And we used to have a hot bath on Saturdays.

Did you all have cold showers every morning?

No we used to just have a wash.

You'd wash your face and hands in the water

Yeah, and then Saturdays, we'd boil the copper up downstairs, and then take buckets of hot water up to the bathroom. So we'd have a bath, Denny and I, and then we'd have a piece of bun for lunch and then go the movies.

by "bun" do you mean like a sultana bun with icing on top

something like that.

Where'd you go to the movies?

Up at Kings Cross

To the Metro?

No, there was Kings Cross theatre, where the Crest Hotel is, there was a theatre there

That was a cinema, was it?

Yes and there'd be the serial and two movies and we'd get a penny to spend.

What could you buy with a penny?

Lollies, lots of things. And that was our big Saturday. We did that for years. And then Eileen, who was married and had had here

first child, John, when he was about 2 or 3, we had to take him to the movies with us: he'd have his dummy and his bottle of milk and Denny and I used to hate it. Anyway in the serial, Buck Jones got shot, and he refused to go to the movies after; we were real pleased, we didn't have to drag him along [laughs].

What would the grown-ups do when you were at the movies?

I don't know. They probably had a nice free time.

Did you ever have takeaway food?

Oh no, there was no such thing

How about fish and chips?

Yes there was, there was a fish and chip shop in Victoria St, next to the Picadilly Hotel, and yeah occasionally we'd have fish and chips of a Friday night. That'd be it. And I think I had my first Chinese meal, went to a Chinese restaurant, when I was about 20. And I had a chicken omlette.

And what did you think of it?

I liked it! But I didn't like the look of the other food, so that was my start of

Did you go to High School at St Mary's Cathedral

What happened was when I was 13 and I was in first year, which was Year 7, Aunty Alice had stroke. By that time Grandma had died,

Had Uncle Vince come back?

No, Uncle Jim had died, so there was just Aunty Blanche, Uncle Carl and Aunty Alice plus there was Arthur had got married and Stan, and Vince was in the army then. When he'd come home on leave he'd stay there [with us].

So it was 1940 during the war.

So there was Stan and Denny, Uncle Carl, Aunty Blanche and Aunty Alice and Vince when he came home and myself. So she [Aunty Alice] had a stroke and she became an invalide. Why, I don't know, because the stroke just affected her voice, she wasn't paralysed but the doctor said she had to stay in bed. And she still could speak but if she was saying "Pat" she'd say "Doreen, Eileen, Pat", she'd get words mixed up, she spoke quite well actually. She stayed in bed for 5 years. Occasionally, she'd get up and come downstairs, that was very occasionally. But she ruled the house. So at the end of the school, when I was 13, I would have been 14 in January, but the school broke up and I had to stay home and look after the house and her. So I went to night school.

How did you feel about having to stay at home?

Oh well, you just did as you were told. I went to night school for nearly nine months. It was up in Oxford St somewhere, and I used to walk up to Sacred Heart [on Oxford St, near Taylor Square] and catch the tram, it was in Paddington somewhere. But then the American solidiers were out and the streets became unsafe, because there were brown-outs and a couple of girls were murdered so unfortunately I had to stop. I was really sad because it was a really good school, it wasn't like school, it was like Tech I guess. And at the end of the year they were going to put on a big play and we were all very good. But unfortunately I had to leave, so that was the end of the schooling.

What do you remember as your favourite subjects before you finished school

At school? Just English, I liked English; and I like Arithmetic but when I got up to Geometry and Algebra I got lost there, but just the basic Arithmetic, I really enjoyed that. Pretty basic.

Whose decision was it that you should go to night school, was that your decision?

It was the Social Service, Aunty got an allowance finally for Denny and I, and of course they'd check, they'd have inspectors, and because I hadn't turned 14 when I left school they said I had to go to night school, which I was quite happy to do.

Was this an allowance for being orphans?

Yes, I don't know how much it was, I don't think it was very much. But they sort of kept an eye on us, to see we were looked after properly.

We skipped over your Dad's death. What do you remember of that?

Oh yes, he had a heart attack and was in Sydney Hospital for about 6 weeks, and they discharged him

How old were you?

I was 11. And he came home and he was home for a couple of weeks, and he had to go back for a final checkup. So he said he'd walk me to school, and we were in Forbes St [Woolloomooloo] walking along, and he just collapsed and died. And just near a garage, and the men carried him into the garage. One of the men said "Come on, where do you live, come up and get your ..." - Doreen and Aunty came running down but he was dead, he died instantly.

That must have been horrible

Yeah, it was a bit of a shock, yeah.

Were you ever worried about what would happen to you, did you feel you'd get sent to a Home?

I was scared because I remember when one of the inspectors came down and Aunty said Oh there's a man coming and he wants to ask you a few questions, and I started crying "I don't want to go, I don't want to go anywhere, I don't want to go to a Home" and she said "you won't go to a Home, he just wants to find out if ...". And they used you say, you know, "is everything alright" and "are you getting pocket money" and I'd say yes [laughs] - I wasn't, I wasn't getting a cracker, say yes.

How was your standard of living then, was food ever running short?

It was during the [Second World] War, we were on war rations, we had coupons

What did that mean, being on war rations?

Well, you know you could only buy a certain amount of sugar, and butter, and tea. But the grocer was a friend of ours, a family friend

Zammit was it?

Yes, Zammit, Frank Zammit, he looked after us pretty well. And we ate just a stable diet and occasionally like, spaghetti. And everyone would turn up their noses [laughs]

What made you cook spaghetti,

Because I liked it.

because it must have been real foreign food

yes it was

from your friend Jose?

Yes from Mrs Camilleri

Did you have to cook once you started staying home when you were 13

Yes, I had to. And the first, it was a Saturday, I had to cook lunch. We used to have a hot lunch on Saturday, and I had chops and the boys Stan, and Vince and a couple of their friends, they always used to go up to the pub on Saturday morning, and they'd come home for lunch. And I'd burnt the chops, raw inside and burnt on the outside and they said "they're awful" and they abused me [laughs]

Did anyone teach you how to cook?

No I just ... my Aunty would say do this and do that, but she'd be in bed and so I'd just have to battle through. And I ended up I could cook. And Vince would come home, on leave, and he'd have to get up at a certain time, and he'd say "WAKE me" so I'd wake him.

So you'd have to get up earlier

I had to get up every morning from the time I was 13 to get Stan's breakfast and cut his lunch. And I used to have to get up about hup past six every morning.

And what was their breakfast

Just cornflakes, tea and toast, and cut his lunch.

He was working by then was he?

He was a moulder, he started work at 14, he used to ride his bike to Waterloo.

So he worked there all his life?

Yeah, he did. And they closed down and he went to another firm. In those days, they didn't have showers, and moulding [molten iron] is a filthy job. They had to provide their own clothes and everything, there was no union, and at Christmas, they'd just close the factory down for two weeks, without paying. So they worked under really hard conditions, and he tried to join the Army but he was in a protected industry and they wouldn't let him, and he was very very disappointed. He joined the militia but he was really really disappointed that he couldn't join the Army. And then gradually, the union, they had to provide them with boots and special overalls, because there used to be a lot of burns with the moulding

And when you say moulding, you're talking about molten iron

Iron moulding

And what would they mould it into?

All different things, cast iron. I was just going to say something ...

Sorry, providing them with overalls and boots

Showers, they put hot showers in for the men, because he used to come home filthy and he'd have to have a bath every day

A hot bath

Yes a hot bath, boil the kettle and take the buckets up. And his clothes, they just stood. They were horrible to wash, they were really bad. The conditions in those days were terrible.

Take us through your typical day when you were looking after Aunty, you'd get up at 6:30 and make Stan his ...

I was still going to school when I started getting up at 6:30, I'd get up and make his lunch, then I'd go back to bed about 7 o'clock and stay in bed until about 8, then get up, get breakfast, take a basin of hot water up for Aunty so she could wash in bed

and who was home at this stage

Uncle Carl, and Aunty Blanche and Stan and Denny and myself and Vince when he was on leave. When Vince would say "wake me" at a certain time, and I'd wake him, and he wouldn't get up, and I'd call him again, and he'd throw shoes at me [laughs], and he said the other day "I still feel guilty about how I used to treat you", he said "you should have got a bucket of water and thrown it over me" I said to him "you probably would have killed me!" [laughs] "Get out!" and throw a shoe. And then I'd have to iron his Army uniform,

You didn't have an electric iron then, did you?

No, it was hard khaki material, cotton khaki, real thick and I'd press them and wouldn't have the creases straight and he'd tell me off and go off at me [laughs]. So then I'd clean the house, you'd have to scrub the house

you're talking about the floors,

yes

the floors were wood?

No, lino. Lino. You'd start at the front door, and you'd kneel and scrub the whole downstairs, and then you'd go upstairs and scrub the bedrooms.

And were they very dirty?

No, you did that once a week and then you'd polish the lounge room and the hallways. And no wonder I've got crook knees [laughs]. And the washing, you'd boil the copper

The copper was a big tub made out of copper

Yes, you had an open fire underneath

Where'd you get the wood for that?

You'd get wood from everywhere I suppose, you had a wood man come and he'd bring wood. Had to chop the wood, logs, you know, pieces of wood

Did you do the chopping or was that men's work?

yeah, I was still chopping wood when you were born [1957]. I think we got our washing machine, I bucked up and said I wanted a washing machine when you were born. Yeah, I used to chop wood, you'd boil the copper, you'd put all the whites, like sheets and towels and white clothes in the copper and you'd boil them and you'd put caustic soda, "washing soda" it was called, and you'd put them into the tub, and you'd rinse them

with just cold water

yes, and the other tub was cold water with blue in it, there was little knobs of blue and that was supposed to whiten them further

what was the blue, do you know

it was just little knobs, Reckitts Blue, Reckitts Blue, we used to call it. We'd put them in that, and rinse them and hang them on the line, we had rope lines, just like these, lots of times they'd broke and all the

So you'd hang them on the rope lines and they'd fall and get muddy

Sometimes they'd wear out of course, and they'd all fall, and they'd all get dirty.

What did you have for lunch, typically

Devon sausage, you'd go down and get thruppence worth of devon and have sandwiches

what sort of bread

just white bread that was all the bread. And there was brown bread, it was just coloured, it wasn't wholemeal. It was white or brown, and it was just french loaves you know, that's all the bread they had, there was no different like Vienna or that

Walter [Pat's husband]: they had Vienna didn't they

No, not till later on, after the war, when the Italians all come, wanted good bread

And what would you do of an afternoon, would you have to go and pick up Denny from school or anything?

No, no, he'd come home on his own. Just muck around, probably have a rest, cook dinner, start cooking dinner; in between time looking after Aunty, who was in bed.

And what about of an evening

Of an evening, you'd have dinner and listen to the radio

W: Dad and Dave

You'd have serials, Dad and Dave. On Sunday nights, they used to have Macquarie Playhouse and that was a one hour show and it was marvellous. They had all these beautiful plays, and everyone would just sit around the wireless [radio] and listen to the plays, they were absolutely fantastic.

and if you weren't listening to the radio, would you play cards or read?

Yes, My father and the older members of the family would play cards, but we were never taught, you know like Euchre, they used to play Euchre, these really complicated games. But Denny and I, we used to play ordinary games, like Rummy and stuff like that, easy, Poker, like you know kid's Poker and stuff like that. We'd play poker and we'd read. We'd read.

What did you use for lighting?

Electricity,

Do you remember when that came?

It was there when we moved in. They still had the gas lights connected to the kitchen. And after we were married, they used to have lots of blackouts and [your] Dad bought the mantle, and we used to have the gas light, you don't remember ...

I remember the gas light coming out at the top of the stairs, I don't remember one in the kitchen

it used to oh give a fantastic light, they're really good

What sort of neighbourhood was Kings Cross, Woolloomooloo in those days. Did you think of yourself as living in Kings Cross or Woolloomooloo?

No, it was just ordinary people, families, working class families, everyone knew everyone, everyone gossiped: you couldn't do much at all. Woolloomooloo was the same, everyone would meet in the grocer shop or the butcher's shop or the vegetable shop, like you used to shop every day because you only bought small quantities. You only had an ice chest.

What's that?

It's a chest and the ice man would come three times a week and give you a block of ice, and he'd bring it in and put it into the ice chest and the water used to drip down a pipe under the house. So, you know, you couldn't keep food like you do now, so every day you went to the grocer's, you went to the butchers, you went to the vegetable shop

Where'd you get the money for all that

Well Stan was working, Uncle Carl was working ...

What did he do?

He was a male hairdresser, he worked and Aunty got a pension

They had pensions back then?

yes,

What, an invalide pension

No just an old age pension, not much and that's how we survived.

What did you remember of the war?

I was still at school when war broke out

Were you very worried that you were all going to get invaded?

No, no, it was sort of "over there" very far away, which was a long long way from here, but then as it got closer and then again of course, all the call ups and the Americans came, and then we were bombed in Sydney, the harbour was bombed by the Japanese

that was the mini-sub

Yes, the mini-sub. My Aunty had finally come downstairs, and the boys built a cellar and they built a trapdoor in the dining room so we could go and sit in the cellar and she said "No way, not going to sit in that dirt and cockroaches" [laughs]

because it was just a dirt floor [under the house]

Yes, so we all sat in the dining room with this huge mirror over the mantelpiece [laughs] and that was it. I mean, it was a huge mirror, it would kill us all, huge big bloody mirror [laughs] that was Uncle Carl.

Did you have open fireplaces that burnt wood, back then

Yes we had fuel stove in the kitchen, (which was our dining room, you'd remember it as our dining room) had a fuel stove there and a little gas ring, and then, later on, they put a ...

by a fuel stove, you mean it burnt wood

yes, it burnt wood, lovely, it was lovely oven, it cooked beautiful cakes and things like that. And then they put a - I think we were still

renting the house - they put a gas stove into the laundry (our kitchen was the laundry originally because it had the tubs and the copper) and the gas stove there. It was still there when we got married

Why would they put a gas stove in a laundry?

That was the only place it would fit

And what about toilets, were you on the sewerage, you didn't have a nightsoil man who would come

No, we had a proper toilet

But it was outside

out back,

so you had to go out the back door to go to the toilet

[laughs] Yeah

whether it was cold or windy

yeah, I often think today when I go to the toilet, fancy going out in the cold

It must have been a pretty busy toilet when you had the whole family there

and one bathroom

did you have big fights?

No, I don't remember having fights, everyone just sort of, well, I think you adjust and everyone ... you have to, otherwise it would be a nightmare, and everyone just works out what time they have a shower or whatever

You were very religious, were the whole family religious?

No, my Auntie was Church of England, they were all Church of England my Aunties and Uncles, they weren't very religious, like Dad was, she always made us go to Church and not eat meat on Friday. They wouldn't eat meat on Good Friday, but she always made sure that we didn't eat it.

and were you very religious?

Yeah, I used to go to Church a lot, and sometimes at school, I'd go up at lunchtime. We were sort of very ... well, the way you were brought up, you know, you go and pray for everyone, and have penance and all the rest of it

and you were growing up as a young woman and at the same time having to look after this whole household

Yes, and then they had a call up, for women, you know because of war, everyone was called up and I wanted to go to work. Of course, I wasn't allowed to because I had to look after ... they got doctor's certificates to say I was the only one capable of looking ... they could have managed because there was my Uncle Carl and my Auntie Blanche, they could have managed

Why didn't they look after you - they were all adults

Because you were the youngest girl and that was your duty

It's strange that you'd rob a girl of an education just for your own convenience

Well, this is it. I could have gone to school longer and done things when I came home, or things like that. But no, someone had to be there to run, you know, and my Auntie had this damn dog, it was a Pomeranian, and they called it Billy. Why Billy? So they'd trick the other dogs it was male [laughs] and then Billy would get on heat, which I didn't know anything about, and all the dogs would come rushing after Billy; [high pitched:] "Bring Billy in, bring Billy in! Can't take her for a walk" and I'd say "Why?" [high pitched:] "No, no, no, you can't take her for a walk" [laughs]

No one ever talked about sex in those days

No we didn't know a dog was on heat or anything. And then it would fart in the middle of the night, and she'd wake me up and say "Go down and see what is wrong with Billy, why he was farting". So a couple of times in the night you'd have to get up and go down

and say "Shut up, Billy" [laughs].

Did you have holidays or picnics, or did you travel outside of Sydney

No, no. Dad used to take us to see friends of his, maybe at Bronte, we'd go to, occasionally to Watsons Bay. Uncle Carl used to take us, Denny and I, down to the Domain and [Botanical] Gardens Sunday morning. As we were going he'd say "Now don't ask for anything because you're not getting anything, you're coming home to lunch", so we'd go around the Domain. But we used to go to the Domain Baths, we could walk there,

that was the swimming baths

Yes, the swimming. We spent a lot of time in the Summer, going to the Domain, swimming there.

What were your swimming costumes like?

One piece,

Was it neck to knee?

No just ordinary; they were mainly woollen, you know, they were wool

Do you remember any sport happening, like Dawn Fraser or any of the others, Don Bradman would have been in your time

Well you heard about Don Bradman but I wasn't interested in cricket. And you didn't hear about sports so much, there was just the wireless

Did you used to get the newspaper?

Yes, always got the newspaper, the [Sydney Morning] Herald and there used to be ... Dad would bring home the Sun, the Sun I think it was of a night time. So we always had lots of things to read, which was good. And the library, we used to go to the library

And what about the Government, was there much politics in the family,

No, not a great deal, we were always Labor, we used to always ... Labor. Because In those years it was [Liberal Prime Minister] Menzies - the Liberals were in for so many years, weren't they. During the war it was Curtin and Chifley, they did a great job, but then after the war Menzies was voted in.

As you were becoming a young woman, did you have any money to spend, on fashion or anything?

Not much, not much, just had to have essentials and used to have hand-me-downs from my sisters, which I had to sew and fix up. So I always had clothes. Well, you didn't have many clothes, not like now.

Your Aunty died did she?

She died when I was 19. There was just Blanche and Uncle Carl and Stan. Denny by that time had joined the Army

By that time the war would have been over, I suppose

Just about, I think.

Do you remember when the war was over?

Oh look, yes, my Aunty was still alive when the war was over and I remember VE Day [Victory in Europe Day - 8 May 1945] and everyone was shouting and they were all going into town, and I had to go down to the shops and get the food in because all the shops were going to close, and I missed out on the celebrations [laughs] because I had to go and get everything.

You would have been about 16 then

17, going on 18, I think. Well, anyway. She died when I was 19 and of course there was still Blanche, and then Blanche started to say she was sick and wanted to stay in bed. Oh, this is it, I'm going to have to spend another 5 years with an invalide, but the doctor who attended her, it was mainly mentally with her, he said she's perfectly healthy, it's just because Alice is gone, she wants to be the next one. And the doctor said it's not fair for you to have to do this. And they put her in a home, and she stayed there, we were married, and had Rod and Marc, so she lived quite a while. And she used to come out occasionally for weekends and stuff like that. And then I met Dad

Wait a sec, we'll get to that. What was the effect of all these people dying?

Oh it was terrible.

For us in our family it is very rare thing, and for you there were people dropping off the twig every 5 minutes by the sound of it

Like from the time I was 11 years old, there was Dad, then Grandma, and Aunty - it was terrible, it was really ... you know, just one after the other

Did that make you scared, that it was going to happen to you or were you like most young people - immortal?

No, never going to happen to me [laughs]. It just played on your mind, though. When you come to think of it, kids these days, just don't know anyone close to them that's died. It's very rare isn't it. It was a lot.

Did you think of yourselves as poor or just normal?

Just normal, working, just normal, we didn't think we were poor because we were always fed, and had a house.

And did you know people who were poor?

Yes, some people were a lot worse off than us, they had no jobs.

Parents mistreating them? Alcoholics?

Yes, alcoholics and they had no work. So kids at school would come and wouldn't have a proper uniform and stuff like that. But we always had a uniform and enough to eat.

And did you know any people that you thought of as rich

No. Like Jose's parents they had a grocery shop, so they had a fridge whereas we had an ice box. That was about the only thing. And Frank Zammit had a motor car.

How'd you used to get about if you didn't have a motor car

Tram. Tram used to run right into the city, right to Watsons Bay. And bus. But mainly it was the trams, and then they took the trams off.

Did you ever go to Bondi on the trams, did you go to the beach, into the surf?

Yes, yes, we used to go there of a weekend. Mainly we went to the Domain baths, because there was the Women's Baths and the Men's Baths. And then they closed the Women's Baths because they were falling to bits, so it was all men and women in the Men's Baths.

So about the age of 19 your Aunty Alice died, and your Aunty Blanche moved to a Home, your Uncle Carl, was he still around?

He was still alive

By then I suppose you would have had a bit of freedom, would you, in terms of more time to yourself?

I was able to go out, with my friend Jose we'd go to the movies, mainly to the movies, we'd go a couple of times a week

How about dancing, anything like that?

No, we didn't go dancing, wasn't allowed

Why not?

Wasn't allowed to go out with boys

Even though you were, what, 19 at the time.

No

So who made that decision that you weren't allowed to go out

Uncle Carl

So why would he?

So I used to sneak out with boys, occasionally

Why would Uncle Carl make that decision?

Oh well, girls weren't supposed to run around

So how were you meant to meet a husband then?

Friends of your brothers and stuff like that, I guess. Well anyway, I did. I used to go out with boys. I'd find out what movies he was going to - because he went to movies about 4 times a week - so I'd find out what movies he was going to and then I'd go to the opposite [laughs].

I suppose things were very formal in those days, going out with someone

And then I went out - Vince, you know, in the Army, he had a few friends. Then I went out with them a few times, you know, nothing there. Then I was going out with Stan's friend Charlie, he was a lot older than I was, he had a car, he'd been an iron moulder and had moved over to the ice works. And he lived in Cronulla.

That's a long way away

Yes, and his Mum and Dad had a farm, out in Cronulla. So he had a car, so we used to have good times, go to parties, always had parties at home. Like when Eileen and Doreen were at home, they used to have parties, sing-songs, and everyone did their act,

What was your act?

I was too young, this was before I was 19, and Uncle Carl, who was a scream, we found out later he was [laughs] gay. We'd never dream of it. He'd go out with Eileen and Doreen to these parties and he'd get dressed up as a woman, and he'd have a wig on, and all the dresses and all the rest of it, and he'd have a lovely time, he had a personality plus, he used to be the life of the party

And he's the one who made the decision you shouldn't go out with boys!

Yes [laughs] and half the time they'd think he was a woman, and even Eileen and Doreen, they didn't realise. You just didn't realise, until years later, you suddenly discovered, Oh, he was gay.

The war's over, did things pretty much quickly return to normal

We were still on rations and things were very hard to get, you still had clothing coupons, and even when I got married, I was 21 when I got married, it was hard, you had to search all over Sydney to get proper clothes and that.

Once Auntie had died, had you had any thoughts about what you would do? Did you think you'd try and get yourself educated or get a job

No, no, I just stayed home.

And that was normal: Stan would bring in some money from his job, you'd look after the house

Yes. And when I was 21, my father had an insurance when he died and each of the kids got 21 Pound. And 21 Pound was quite a bit. So I got 21 pound when I was 21, or 20, it might have been 20, it was before I got married. I went for a holiday at Bara? It's a dam now, it was flooded.

South in the [Snowy] Mountains, where there's snow gums?

No it wasn't that far

There's a Burrinjuck dam down in the Snowy Mountains

No, it wasn't that far, it was 2 hours

Warragamba?

Warragamba! I went to a guest house there and went horse riding. I took a couple of lessons horse riding, I loved it, I had a good time.

Was that with a friend?

No, went on my own

That would have been a big step

It was, it was, yes. Yeah it was near Camden, that's right.

What did you think would happen with your life at that stage, you'd get married one day?

Yes, that's right, you'd meet someone, get married and have a family. That was your whole ambition.

Were you worried about meeting someone?

No, no, because I wasn't old

You were 19, Mum, I mean ...

Yeah, 20, no, I had plenty of boyfriends, I wasn't short of boyfriends, so I wasn't worried that I'd never get married

How come you never got really serious with any of the boyfriends?

Well, with Charlie I started to, and he must have been about 18 years older than I was, he was a friend of Stan's, he was a good time, like he'd go out and you'd have a great time with him, he'd party on and he'd take you out. He was a really nice guy. Before him, I was going out with the butcher's brother, he'd been in the war, and he came to work for his brother down in Woolloomooloo, Ken, his name was, and he was nice. He was getting very serious, oh, I don't know, he lived out in Auburn and real western suburbs. I wasn't really that keen to move out and settle down. And then I started going out with Charlie, and then he started to get a bit serious, and then I met [your] Dad

So tell us a bit about meeting

Well, that was funny. He came to Australia to wait for a ship to go to New Zealand.

This is Walter Edward Diacono

Yes, he was a naval lieutenant

in the British navy

yeah, the first time I met him, he was in his white naval uniform and he was very handsome and very nice, very polite. He came to live with a friend of his about 3 houses up, to share his little unit or rooms. And he was waiting for a ship to New Zealand. The first time I met him, we had, we were talking and I said to him "Well, I'll see you later" and he said "What time?" [laughs] and I cracked up. And then one day, we went to Mrs Cammileri and her youngest son Alfie, who was 15, we went to Redleaf [Harbour swimming pool near Double Bay] and Walter came with us and he thought I was Alfie's girlfriend, because I looked so young, he thought I was 15. And then I pulled out a cigarette, and then he realised I must have been a bit older. He was just about engaged to an English girl he'd met in India, and I was, you know, going out with Charlie and we started going out a bit.

Weren't you put off, because he would have had a foreign accent, wouldn't he?

Yes, I liked him, when I told ... see I was going out with him on the sly, they didn't know, the family didn't know because I was still going out with Charlie, so then I dropped Charlie and I said I'd met Walter and he was Maltese. Well, my sisters nearly had a fit, you know, "Wogs", because any Maltese or that

Mediterranean, really

Yes, Italian, they were fishermen from Woolloomooloo, they were real common class and they never met him. So finally they asked me to bring him out to meet them, and oh, once they met him, they just fell in love with him, he was so nice and so polite. And every time they'd pull out a cigarette, he'd jump up and light their cigarettes [laughs]. We started going out and then we dropped off and then we started going back out again and then he said "Come on, enough of this, let's get married" and I said "Alright".

Where would you go when you were going out with Dad

Oh, we'd go around for walks, to movies, he'd take me out to a restaurant for a meal.

Is that this Chinese one we went to

No, that was with Charlie, this Chinese meal. We were only really going steady for about three months and then he said "that's it, make up your mind, we get married" because he was 10 and a half years older than I was and he was ready to settle down. So we started, like at home, there was just Uncle and Stan by then, so we started looking for somewhere to live, like to rent, and the rooms - that was mainly rooms, there wasn't units or anything - were so hard to find accommodation, and they were so terrible and you had to pay a couple of hundred for bonds and things like that. So we decided we'd stay at 62 [Brougham St, Kings Cross] because Uncle and Stan were still there and I wanted to look after them and we were paying rent, I think it was 27 [pounds] and 6 [shillings] a week by then. Yeah, that'd be right, 27 and 6. So we got married, Stan gave me away

Where'd you get married?

St Marys Cathedral - it was just, probably about 40 people, as we were walking up the aisle, my feet started to go numb, I got pins and needles in my feet and I said to Stan "let's sit down for a minute" and he said "Come on" [laughs] so we had our reception at Rippons Coffee Shop in King St [Sydney City] and they had a special room, so we had our reception there and then we went to Meadow Baths for our honeymoon, up before you reach Katoomba, up the [Blue] Mountains, it was a big guest house there, Meadow Baths, it's still there, they've changed the name, some big company has bought it out. It was the height of luxury, we had a week there, and then we went back to Brougham St and Walter, we started painting

Had you had to change all the sleeping arrangements?

Walter and I had the front room, Uncle Carl had the middle room and Stan had the back room. No, Uncle Carl was still downstairs

that was the front room

Yeah, we left it like that, we started to fix the house up, we bought a, got a second hand lounge

Do you remember the marriage date

Yes, 29th May 1948. So we got a second hand lounge from someone, we bought you know different things

Did Dad have a job by then?

Yes, he started working actually before we were married, he found a job with Cooks, Thomas Cook [Travel Agents] and he decided he would stay in Australia, he wouldn't go to New Zealand, he was happy with the job, then he met me

A beautiful new wife

Yes, [laughs] met me, so we lived, then Rod was born in 49, [26] August 1949.

So just before Rod was born, you would have had a year or so, or maybe six months, when you weren't pregnant

May, June, July August, a year and three months, nine months, so it was six months

So what did you do in those times, did you have much money for going out, seeing friends,

Not a great ... we had friends, used to see Eileen and Doreen, go out there

Did you have big family get togethers

Yes, like they, all my brothers, we'd try and organise something, my brothers would come with their wives, because Vince was living up in Queensland at that time and he got married about the same time as I did but he got married up there

And that was to Mary

Yes,

do you know what part of Queensland?

Well, they were in Brisbane and then they went to Charleville and he was working up there and Michael O'Leary, their son, was born in Charleville.

Do you want to leave it there,

yeah if you like

we'll stop it there and carry on

When?

There's plenty of time

I want to have a rest

Not now, not today, another day, thanks a lot. That was Patricia Maria Diacono explaining her life and times, when she was born up to when her first child was born in 1949

When I was pregnant with Rod, no, it wasn't with Rod, it was with one of you others, I think it was Brendan and I was carrying so low, that for the last four weeks I could barely walk so I'd have to see a doctor in Macquarie St [Sydney City] so I'd ring a cab and a cab would pick me up and one day, this cabbie started talking about he owned a guesthouse at one time, and "the women they were filth"; and he was running the women down, how filthy they were, "they used to wee in the sink ... not talking about you, love, I can see you're a lady". And from the time we went until the time we got there he was talking about women, how filthy they were, got out of the cab, got into the doctor's and I'd had my urine sample but it had fallen out of my bag

into the taxi!

[laughs] so I don't know what [laughs]. Come and have some hot soup. I always remember that.

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