

Make Do, Mend...and Lend

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The wedding of Irene Cooperstein to Cyril Silver at Windsor Place Synagogue in October 1944.

Image courtesy of Irene Silver (née Cooperstein).

It has been my privilege to interview members of the Cardiff and Swansea Jewish community about their experiences and memories of the Second World War.

Between just three interviewees they had a combined age of 289 years. The stories shared help us to build a picture of the Jewish communities in south Wales when it was thriving. The synagogues were full and there were kosher butchers and bakeries in our Welsh cities; however, these stories are not just relevant to those who wish to research the Welsh-Jewish community. Our 'Voices Through Time' oral history project also provides valuable historical information about the wider community and society at this time, all through first hand eyewitness testimony.

To my three interviewees, the memories of their wartime experiences were still very clear, and they shared some of the stories which have stayed with them for over 70 years.

I have heard about the dangers of working in an ammunition factory in Bridgend, and the challenges of driving an ambulance over the Welsh mountains during the blackouts – especially when you are not tall enough to reach the pedals and reverse at the same time!

I learned that a stamp collection was important enough to a little boy that he climbed over the rubble of his bombed-out school in Cardiff to retrieve it from his desk.

Due to rationing, many households began to grow their own food in their gardens, and some even kept chickens and beehives to supplement their war time rations. A young boy who arrived in Swansea from the Kindertransport describes how his foster family kept bees, and these bees had their own allocated sugar rations from the government. He would be responsible for collecting the sugar for the bees and the chicken feed, but he also had the less favourable job of collecting horse manure from the street for the vegetable patches. Another lady described her mortification that her mother became so invested in growing vegetables that she also filled her front garden with brussels sprouts and cabbages. As a teenage girl she found this extremely embarrassing when all the neighbours still maintained their flower beds at the front of the house.

Even though kosher meat was readily available through the kosher butchers, fish was a very important part of the Jewish diet. I had not considered that the price of fish had sharply risen because of the danger to life it presented to fishermen heading out into wartime waters. This stretched family finances even further in lean times.

However, one of my favourite war time stories was about a wedding dress. When you were married during the war years, you were allocated an extra seven clothing ration tokens to buy a dress or a suit. Many people made their own dresses, but a young bride to be named Irene Cooperstein was overjoyed to find a beautiful plain satin dress on sale in the window of a Cardiff department store. It was made before the war because wedding dresses were now considered a luxury item and new ones were not being manufactured. The dress was so plain and utilitarian she bought decorative braiding and spent hours sewing it around the collar, hem and cuffs. She married her husband in Windsor Place Synagogue in 1944, but this was not the end of the story for her dress – she recalls lending her dress to at least two other brides to wear on their special day.

These stories emphasise a time where frugality met generosity, and communities pulled together across religious and social boundaries to make sure everyone came through it together.