



**Interviewee: Gianna Eary**

**Interviewer: Liz Bloom**

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My name is Gianna Eary. I was actually born Maria Grazia Tegacci but Gianna is my name now. I'm 80 years old now. I left Trieste when I was 25 because I married at 23. My family was a big family and my mum thought she was having the menopause but instead, it was me! She was 42 when she had me; it was a mistake! My life was very good because my brothers and sisters were grown up so I was more or less the only child. The younger of my sisters would boss me about which was understandable. My older sister was 17 years older than me and by the time I was 5 she was married with a child so I had a niece who was only 3 years younger than me. I had a very good life. During the war the Germans came in and that was a bit difficult because.... I mean Trieste was very mixed....don't forget that my dad was Italian but my mum

wasn't; she was Austrian. In fact, when she was cross with me she used to call me naughty words in German! During the war, first we had a few bombs, but not much because Trieste only had a big factory outside the town...I can't remember what it was. We had some bombing and then the Germans came and that was a difficult time even though the Germans didn't feel bad in Trieste because we were so mixed. It wasn't like they were in Italy or in the South. We had a few horrible things; yes, in fact, I remember quite well.... We had the partisans who were behind Trieste in the mountains of Yugoslavia. They decided to kill 8 German soldiers and for reprisal, the Germans took 80 men from the prison and they hanged them around the barracks on each window. Of course I was a teenager, you know; stupid, like teenagers are and the boys said, "Let's go and see!" I said, "No!" "Yes, let's go and see these hanging people on the windows!" I was probably born short-sighted, so I said, "I'm coming," and I took my glasses off! So I saw 'things' but nothing horrible. That was the only bad thing because people felt bad to think that 80 soldiers....10 for each soldier killed....but that is war, isn't it? Then the Germans left and the Australians came first – with the funny hats. Oh, we thought they were great. "Let's go and see the Australians!" We were waving at them: they were the first through. After they left, the Americans came and they went into the surrounding area. I mean Trieste is a big town itself but around it was Yugoslavia and in fact behind my house it is very hilly but half an hour from my house was the border with Yugoslavia ... or Slovenia it's called now. The funny thing was that the people in Slovenia used to take their cows into Italy and then back again! That was the border, you see; we had soldiers at the border. The Americans went around and the British were in the town. Yes, we accepted them; nobody felt bad about them as far as I remember.

When my family knew that I met this Englishman, my mum said, "Well, you're always talking about England!" Yes, to me London was the Mecca which was a bit silly really. The General welcomed the Italian people into their barracks and my husband was the sergeant looking after the transport for the people who came to see....so I expect I met him by chance and then I seem to remember that he asked me to go dancing and I probably did and after that I can't remember what happened. Now we had the NAAFI; the Italians used to say, "What are' naafi?" We thought it was a silly word!

A friend of mine, she used to work herself in the barracks and she said, "In the NAAFI they are having dances. Shall we go?"

"Oh," I said, "we can't. There are soldiers there!"

"Well," she said, "we'll go with my auntie." The auntie was obviously a young auntie. We went to the NAAFI for a dance and again, my future husband was the sergeant. I don't think he was in charge but, you know, they are a bit different from the soldiers. He came and said, "Would you like to dance?"

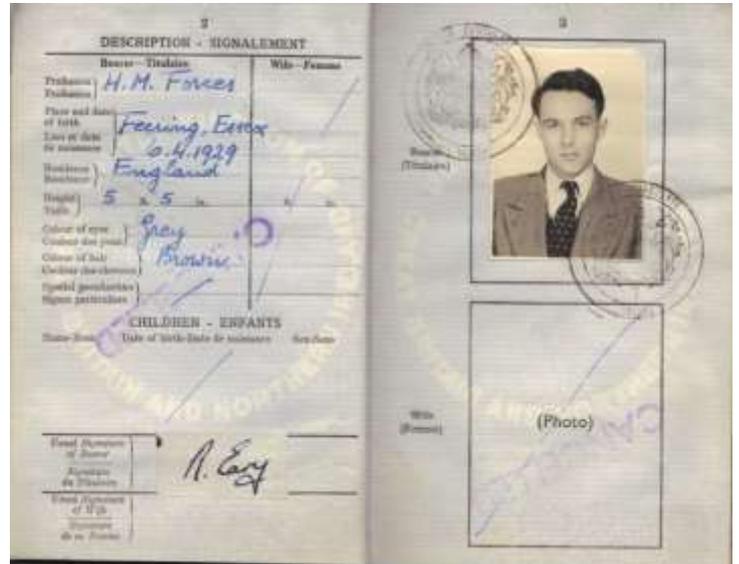
I expect I said, "Si" or possibly, "Yes". After that, yes, I met him again. I remember going for a long walk and not saying a word - me trying to think of something! He obviously decided he wanted to know a bit more and he

started learning Italian. So we used to exchange, "What is this and what is that?" whatever it was. Of course, after that the British Army had to leave. Of course, when he left, he gave me his address and I gave him my address and he wrote almost every few days. When the post used to come, I would hear, "One for you again from England!"

A few of my friends were quite disgusted. They said, "How can you do that; marry an Englishman?"

I said, "Well, I like him!" and that was it.

My mum didn't want me to come to this country by myself so he came to Italy. We got married. Luckily, he was a Catholic like I was, so we married in Trieste. Then he brought me to England, to Kelvedon in Essex. I met his family and obviously they were very nice people because they didn't behave badly towards me or anything. They welcomed me quite well. His dad used to pull my leg quite a lot. His mum was extremely good and his brother and sister welcomed me and the people around. Only one person wasn't very keen. I used to go shopping with a list written down because I wasn't very sure, and I went in the shop and an elderly person was standing there and I asked the man in charge for butter and



sugar and whatever, and she looked at me and she said, quite loudly (I understood and I felt quite bad), "My son was killed at Casino!" Well, I mean, what can I possibly do? Well I just looked at her and.... I remember so well because I was surprised. Otherwise, nobody noticed that I was different – well, I looked different, obviously – but otherwise I had no trouble.

In 1955, when we crossed the channel from France to England in the boat, I noticed there were a lot of black men coming from the boat and I was surprised. I said to my husband, "What are they?"

"Oh", he said, "they come to this country for work." I'd never seen a black man before so I didn't know why they were all together. They just started coming in at that time. We came by train from Trieste to Calais and across the channel with the ferry. I noticed the black workers because they were all together in a group; it was not like they were one or two. That was the first time, in 1955.

We stayed in Essex until 1957 when we came to St Albans. This house was all different; we did a lot of work, obviously. This area of St Albans was lovely because we have a field down here near the house. It was very green and the shops were quite close together down in Fleetville. I thought it was lovely; I was very pleased. We had very nice neighbours. When I used to go to the shops there was a greengrocers shop that doesn't exist any more; she was Irish and she probably thought that we both didn't belong here, and she was very nice. Then another lady round the crescent, she was English but she came to my church; we noticed each other and became friends. Otherwise, I didn't mix much. I never got homesick for Italy. I feel quite bad but I never wanted to go back, no. You see, I was the youngest of a big family and I had no relationship with my sisters because they were both old. My brothers both went in the army. I didn't see them from being a child until I was grown up. The one who went to Russia was away from home for ten years. The rest of my family was grown up; my cousins, my brothers and sisters, so I didn't miss it.

The first meal my mother-in-law gave me was cold meat and potatoes; it was great! I remember because I had never seen cold meat before. That was quite good, yes. I never bothered to look for Italian food. It's strange; my dad was Italian and he came from Tuscany. He came to Trieste to marry my mum but I didn't feel myself really Italian. I like everything in this country and thoroughly enjoy it. That's what I always wanted; I wanted to go to

London. My husband took me there and I went to Baker Street and I said to him, "I'm walking in the same place as Sherlock Holmes!" I still like London but it is so far away and so tiring. My husband would take me quite often; just to walk about and I said to my friends in Italy that I go walking in London! I knew that one day I'd be in this country. The younger of my two sisters, she wasn't married so she used to come here every few years and torment the life out of me! She thought she was my mum, actually, and she was always telling me off. My mum, by the time I was ten, was in her fifties. She wasn't old, but fed up with having a big family and probably with poverty – I don't know - before I came along it must have been hard work having four children in those days when there was privation for everybody, not just for poor people. By the time I came along, she probably thought, "Oh no, not another one!" so I was left to my own devices, I suppose.

When my youngest son was 5, I decided to apply for a job because the children were all at school. My children grew up with me, I never sent them to the nursery or somebody else; they were always with me. My daughter is six years older than the younger one and when the younger one went to school in 1969, I had a chance to talk to somebody about applying for a job. She introduced me to Miss Swann at the Infants School and she was very nice. She said, "What is your name?" and I said, "I've got two!" and she said, "Oo!" so she wrote Maria Gracia to start with and then just Gianna. Maria Grazia was my birth name but nobody calls me that. She said that I could come along and start and see if I thought it was all right and if she thought it was all right. I said, "Fair enough." She'd probably spoken to the person who I had talked to previously so she knew a little bit. So I spent all those years ever so pleased to be there. All the teachers were very nice. There was a Mrs Christmas at that time and I believe her husband's family was something in St Albans. I remember she was well known. There were only two headmistresses while I was there, Mrs Swann and Mrs Renshaw.

On my first day at the Infants School, I was told to just look at what the children were doing and when they finished eating, just move their plates away and when they finished, to clean the table and then join the other lady in the playground. Some children took notice of us. After a while being there, one said to me, "Are you Chinese?" and I said, "Yes!" The accent; he'd never come across a foreign person, so he decided that I must be Chinese if I didn't talk like him. I always remember him. Then we'd go in the playground and make sure that children were not being naughty and tell them off. Then we had to take them to the toilet. On the whole, it was good. Somebody had a loose tooth and I said, "Let's take it out", so I got a piece of paper and got hold of it and pulled it out.... and he told his mum. "The lady took my tooth out!" Obviously the mother had spoken to the teacher and she said, "Thank you very much." After that, the children would all be saying to me that they had loose teeth! They all thought it was a great idea. Sometimes the children were very naughty, especially when it was raining and they couldn't go in until the bell went. One day, I thought they were getting wet so I went to get the bell and I rang it! "You are not supposed to do that!"; one of the supervisors told me off. But otherwise, it was always all right. I left in the early '90s.

I have three children; a daughter and two sons. My daughter has two daughters and they, in turn, have two daughters and two sons. My sons have partners but no children. One lives in London and one is in Stotfold near Hitchin way. My daughter lives in St Albans. My daughter went to Loreto; we are Catholic but not religious. I am nothing now, only that in Italy I was born Catholic. My daughter and the boys, they are not involved in the church at all. The boys went to Nicholas Breakspear. After they left, they said, "Thank goodness for that!"

I don't mix a lot. I don't go to people's houses; I don't like that sort of thing. I don't have a lot of friends because I'm quite happy with myself. I belong to a club – Woodville Ladies. A neighbour, she used to go out every Thursday evening and I was in the garden and I said, "Where are you off to?" and she said that she belonged to a club and she asked me if I would like to join. My husband said it would be evening and he'd be at home...so I did, and it cost me sixpence! It was a long, long time ago; in fact there are only four or five of us from that time still at the club and the rest have all left, you know.

My husband worked at Marconi in Longacres. Well, Marconi had a factory in Essex as well and he found work there after he finished in the army and then he came to St Albans. Then Marconi decided to stop his line. He used to be in medical Xray. Then he went to work as a driver at a place in Chelmsford and he used to go round the hospitals to maintain the Xray machines in the hospitals. It was a good job so we were all right.

I went back to Trieste with my husband and daughter to see my family when my daughter was five because I thought she would like to know my side of the family. After that I didn't go back because my sister, who wasn't married, used to come here every year for a week in the summer. (She refused to learn English. She used to tell me to talk for her!) When the children grew up, my daughter got married and she said, "We should really go back to see everybody because of all the relatives we have". My mum had a big family; she had four brothers and three sisters. So my daughter took me back but I felt ever so ill; I disliked it and I just could not relax. That was it - so I never went there again!

