

London Against Racism: Audio Set 2

Transcript

Wings

The interviewees discuss their childhoods and/or moving to London

1. Julie Begum: discussing bleak times in the East End, 1970's
2. Syd Shelton: moving to London to pursue artistic ambitions
3. Liz Fekete: being seen as exotic by neighbours
4. Jasbir Singh: first impressions on arriving in England

Julie Begum

Well I grew up in the seventies, so it was a quite bleak time. Um for lots of people. And I think it was like that for lots of immigrants as well, who were trying to make um Britain their home. And it wasn't the most friendliest place in terms of... it wasn't great economically, and so there was a lot of backlash against sort of um people coming into the country, taking jobs, taking the women, or whatever it is, that people sort of accused migrant groups of doing. And also... it was quite an angry time, in lots of ways, politically. I mean there was stuff in Northern Ireland going on. The unions were being sort of crushed, really, by Margaret Thatcher when she came into government. And there was like this whole bleak time before where there was um... yeah, not very, it wasn't a very happy time, I think. Economically it was a very bad time for people in the East End. Y'know, in terms of work, and housing was very bad as well. So it was just grim. I just remember it being very sort of grim and bleak, and not very friendly. Quite a lot of hostility from people, as well. And you – I think most people just kept their heads down, and just got on with things, and tried to be invisible as much as possible.

Syd Shelton

I was born in Pontefract in Yorkshire in 1947, to working-class parents, and... who were... my dad was a postman and my mother stayed at home. Myself and my two brothers were brought up in a terraced house in Pontefract. I had always... as a child I was actually christened David Shelton... and my brothers nicknamed me Syd and it stuck and I'm still, at 65, still called Syd. So it's... been a very successful nickname. And it does cause problems sometimes when I forget that it is only a nickname, and when I try to use my passport sometimes which says David. But... my childhood was a happy, normal, working-class childhood, but I really did not want to take up the options which really were presented to me which was to either, when I left school, to either go down the pit at the Prince of Wales colliery which was... were one of the big employers in

Pontefract, or the liquorice allsorts factory which was the other. Because I always wanted, even from quite young, to go to art school. I wanted to... to be an artist as I pretentiously would've said as a kid. And fortunately my parents agreed to let me go to art school and helped me get through that and I was... I went, and for five years I was... I did fine art and painting, and um... but I wasn't satisfied to stay in Pontefract, and it didn't have what I wanted out of life at all, and I wanted a much more exciting and vibrant environment with access to um, galleries and theatres and... and new people. And as soon as I left art school I came down to London and was lucky enough after... a stint of a few months working in a hotel as a pretend wine waiter, I was lucky enough to get a job as a technician and part time lecturer at erm Central... It wasn't Central Saint Martin's in those days. It was St. Martin's School of Art.

Liz Fekete

My parents were refugees from Hungary, and they came after the Second World War... And, thinking about it... of course, I wasn't aware of these things at the time, being very little. At that time Thornton Heath was very white. The Asian population and the Caribbean population started to really settle in that area - particularly around sort of Norbury, Thornton Heath clock tower, when I was about 7 or 8. So thinking about it, I think our family was sort of considered these... the foreigners, the outsiders. I met an old friend, somebody from primary school, the other day, after about thirty years actually, bumped into him on a demonstration, and he was saying how exotic we seemed to everybody because we had thick bread and salami. And, my mother cooked stuffed green peppers and all this food that everybody really sort of enjoyed. So I didn't realise, but at the time we were seen as, sort of, quite exotic and different.

Jasbir Singh

I came over in 1974. September the twelfth. The date's imprinted in my mind. And both... arrived and it was, my aunt, my father's sister, she lived here and she lived on her own. She came and picked us up from the airport and she brought us back to her - I mean, she lived in a small, one-bedroom flat in the Oval. And... so we all kind of, I mean it was a tiny flat. I mean, it was no more than one and a half times this room, really. Everything - we had, a bedroom, a living room and a kitchen, and the bathrooms were downstairs. I think there was - and we lived there for a week and we started getting used to the tube system. I think the main thing which struck me in the first few weeks is I thought I spoke reasonable English when I came. I couldn't understand a word anybody was saying. I think, to do with the accent or whatever, I just couldn't understand a single word. Going to the shops and listening to what people are trying to say - It's just, I used to ask a question and they'd just speak and I never understood a word. It took me several months before I could actually understand what people were saying. And that's just one of those things.