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RECOLLECTIONS OF LEO ZANELLI
RECORDED AT 36 HOLCROFT COURT, CARBURTON STREET WY
ON 25 FEBRUARY 1999

I arrived in Soho in 1939. The war had just broken out, literally within weeks. My father had purchased 21 Romilly Street, but was immediately interned as an Italian, an enemy alien, and was sent to in the Isle of Man.

I went to school at Notre Dame, which was in Leicester Square. The opening was just by the Warner Theatre. The church is still there. The playground was in the basement. When a landmine came down near there on a parachute just by the Empire Theatre, we couldn't go to school for several days. So we went to school at St Patrick's, which is now a school of English, just off Soho Square, where the playground was on the roof. You can still see it if you look up.

The big event was the bombing of St Anne's church. I was sleeping at 21 in the basement when it landed. It woke us up as it was 50 yards away, and you could feel the ground move up and down several times. (I've written a piece for the museum all about getting up in the morning and how we first saw it.)

The bombing was always monopolised by the kids immediately. You always went to bomb sites. We did "mining", because they had marvellous mosaics there. When all the masonry came down and smashed, everybody dug out mosaics, like conkers. The blue clear stones were the nice ones, and the ones with the gold top – everybody knew it was real gold, but so minuscule it wasn't worth anything.

At that time somebody broke into the tombs. It was spooky. About six of us went down. One boy had a torch. There were metal tubular steps. We climbed down the steps and explored – we thought it was a tunnel. I can vaguely remember. I didn't actually see it, but somebody screamed (at the coffins), dropped the torch and everybody ran, all in the dark. Luckily I was at the back, so was the first out. Within days, bones appeared at the top. At one time there was a skull there – so somebody was pillaging.

The other thing about St Anne's was the spiral staircase going up to the tower. We went up there, and I can remember on one of the landings, the first I think, there was a great big wooden chest, full of papers. I remember it was a reddish brown. Everybody was taking handfuls (of the papers) home, but we couldn't read them. The next day at school we heard they shoot looters if they catch them – so everybody burnt them!

There were also plates – they might have been pewter – on the wall (of St. Anne's), but somebody said there were tramps up there and they were very nasty, so we never went up there again. We found a different bombsite.

Half way along Romilly Street, just past 21, there used to be a big fish shop with glass tanks (Myers, or something like that). On the corner there was a hardware shop that used to sell paraffin. That was blasted as well, and never occupied again. It was open at the front, and months after you could still go in there behind the bar and get a pint of paraffin, because the pump was still working.

I've often wondered about the King of Corsica. His grave was round the back there somewhere. It could have been his skull – who knows! I wondered whether they had a

list of the people who were buried down there (St Anne's). When they filled it up and put the car park on top, I'd grown up a lot and knew all the people who were involved in filling it up. They were all "collectors". I would guarantee everything went from there.

From St Anne's there was a woman who wanted to form a youth club, which we did. It was just off Carnaby Street – "St Anne's Youth Centre". That ran for several years. We had a football club – Soho Football Club. The colours were green and black. We were given the shirts, so we had no choice in the colours. Just the kids from Soho. We played at Hackney Marshes all the time. We played all the other schools. It was flexible, we weren't in a league, and we'd find a team that had a spare date and arrange a pitch at Hackney Marshes. There was a little van from the Soho Youth Centre. Later several of the lads had cars. We had some good players, but everyone was playing for fun.

About 1946 the war was over and my father was working as a chef. We still had the house. My uncle Peter, a former band leader, persuaded my father to let him open a vegetarian restaurant, probably only the second in London (there was one in Leicester Square already). It didn't do all that well. My father wouldn't go in there. He was an old Italian who liked his salami ("Cooking nuts all day – you must be nuts!"). Eventually my father took it over and called it La Tosca and it became an Italian restaurant in 1948/49.

The name of the vegetarian restaurant was the Jill on the Green. The name was adapted by John Hargrave, an advertising copywriter and friend of the family. He invented the "What we want is Watney's" campaign between the wars. Peter brought him in, and he said vegetarians are different people (especially in those days) and you want something they know from folklore. He came up with Jack in the Green and said what about making it Jill in the Green. They don't want things like "Metro"!

It was all nut cutlets then, pretty dismal fare. My uncle used to do wonders, being Italian. He used to do an Italian tomato sauce. Quite often vegetarians would say there were pieces of meat in it when it was porcini mushrooms.

I was helping out in the kitchen once in a while. I lived in those premises from the age of nine until my late twenties. We still stayed in Soho until I was 35, when my first kid was born.

After Tosca, 21 Romilly Street was purchased by Indians. After we left we read in the papers that one of the partners had been caught fiddling the till, and they killed him. They beat him with a hammer or something and he died on the spot. I don't know what it became after that.

I was born in Kings Cross. When they pulled our block down, they re-housed everyone in Islington. My father was a chef and decided to buy 21 Romilly Street and let it out, and perhaps have a little club downstairs. My mother was one of five, and everybody was around. My uncle Peter lived at the top with his wife. Through show business (Peter had several bands) people used to stay there, including the Wallenders, a very famous high-wire trapeze group, the biggest names in the circus business. They used to stay there a lot, and left trunks in the attic full of ropes and things for swinging. At one time the tallest man in the world had a room there as well. No, he didn't have a long bed. God, did he look big! He died at the age of 28.

What sort of bands did your uncle have?

One of them was an accordion band, an "Argentinean band". It wasn't – it was an Italian band. They played all over the country – seaside places, the lot – and India.

We later lived in Newport Buildings (the west side, now demolished). We moved out when they were demolished. By then I'd just got married. My father died when we were still living in Newport Buildings. My mother was housed in Carburton Street, while I was doing my tour.

When we moved to Newport Buildings my father purchased a club just off Gerrard Street called the Tosca Club, and until he died he ran that. It was there so long it got onto the Ordnance Survey map. One of his best friends was Jimmy Wicks, who was Henry Cooper's manager. Henry Cooper used to be in there, but not regularly. Henry used to go over the road to eat at a restaurant, and met his wife who was a waitress there. It was a typical continental all men's drinking club (the odd wife might go in there to pull somebody out!). They just used to play cards all the time, and darts. It was very successful. Now it's a Chinese restaurant.

My father's best friend Dick also had a club, a couple of hundred yards up the road in Greek Street. My mother purchased that when my father died and then sold it. I still pop down there once in a while.

All through the 50's I was a photographer. About seven years ago they said they wanted to do a photographic exhibition in Soho. I submitted a hundred photographs of Soho. Two years later I enquired about the photos, for which I had a receipt, and I got 50 back. Three weren't even mine. The exhibition never went on. It was a shame.

The main thing I can remember about Soho is the diversity, the mix of people: Chinese, not so many blacks, odd little mixes (there was an Irish-Greek lad called Paddy Nicopopholis), French, Belgian. There was an incredible cultural mix, not stuck in little groups. Up Charlotte Street there was a big German restaurant (Schmidt's?) and a store next door. The French House was originally French. It has only become gay since the son took over.

I wrote my first book in Newport Buildings: "Teach Yourself How to Swim Underwater", and edited some underwater magazines.

Along Berwick Street from Peter Street, on the left there was an alleyway, very narrow that you could climb up with your back. They used to proliferate through London. If you were on the run from the npolice you could dive in one and climb up the wall. I've seen people do it.

Where did your family shop for the restaurant?

My father would have ordered from Bifulcor (corner of Old Compton Street and Greek Street) – a butcher who supplied all the top restaurants with meat. Over the road was Heine's (a greengrocers). That's where Jacky Spock got stabbed, right next to the Bar Italia on the corner.

So the story goes (one of our friends Burt Marsh was around at the time) Jacky Spock came in and said "I'm going to do you up, Albert". If you're going to knife someone you don't tell them you're going to do it! Albert promptly took the knife off him and stabbed him. Burt Marsh hailed a cab quickly and got Albert out of it. Dimes – Di Mayo was his name.

Going back to the French House, there used to be a club upstairs owned by a chap called The Lone Wolf (Tony Muller) because he never mixed with other gangs. A big burly fellow. He was a right thug. I remember we were outside what was called the Zodiac Bar then (I think it's a strip club now), as teenagers, with Johnny Puliano. Johnny had a bag of peanuts and Tony Boffer and Tony Muller came along and picked up this bag of nuts. Boffer said "Hey, Tony – he's an Italian boy". He turned straight away and said "Sorry, son" and they just walked away.

Muller was the arch-villain then, a hard nut. One day Tony phoned up his club's manager from the phone box opposite and said, "Are you ready?" "What do you mean, son?" "I'm in the phone box over the road and I'm coming in there." He explained how he'd found out the guy had been cheating on him. The rest was in the papers.

Tony Muller came walking up the stairs and the guy was so terrified he got a revolver and shot Tony two or three times. Apparently Tony just stopped, looked at him, turned around and walked down the stairs. The other guy thought he was going to get a chopper or something, and committed suicide on the spot – he shot himself – whereas Tony Muller just walked down the stairs, dropped onto the pavement, collapsed and died.

Were you aware of all the gangsters?

Of course, you knew them all. I remember a bunch of us being outside St Anne's, and a lad from up north said "Hey lads, what do you reckon about that club up there – is it any good?", meaning Tony Muller's. We said "Stay away, whatever you do – you'll only be ripped off". He said "Might as well give it a try" and off he went.

Were there girls on the street?

Oh yes, especially in the morning. Just before Meard Street on the left was that little alleyway. Right at the end there was a green caste iron men's toilet, where the homosexuals hung out. I understood later on that when they demolished it some Texan took it to Texas (reminiscences, or just liked the design?). There was always a little coffee stall on wheels outside there. In the early hours of the morning there'd be girls there, and often they'd ask for a lift home. Fellers were hanging around as well.

The other big hangout for them was Doris's on Lisle Street. If you come down Gerrard Place, immediately behind the Warner Theatre, on the right there is a little courtyard. That was a big snooker hall (I think Wheeler's took it over). Right next door to it was a café, Doris's, because Doris ran it. They all used to go in there, even Danny la Rue went in there once, or some other big drag artist. You used to get the homosexuals in there and the prostitutes.

Where did you go when you went out?

The Lyceum invariably, until you got a car. Everybody thought they knew a dance hall where there were three girls to every boy, but we never found this place! Coming back on a Friday night all blind drunk, we'd make a detour to come back through the East End because you could go to the bagel factory (still there).

Did you have a car when you were in Soho?

Yes, I used to have an Austin Clifton Tourer, which was very big (16 horse power). I paid a fiver for it. My father didn't like it. When he won a bet on the horses, we bought a new car for £888, one of the very first Consuls, from the Ford showrooms up in Regent Street. We used to park it outside Newport Buildings. The irony was then that people used to double park on top of you. You couldn't get out. Or else you'd go somewhere and come back and people had parked there all day. I used to park at Camden Town and come down on the bus. Then the meters came in and the double lines, and parking became impossible in the end. My father couldn't drive, but he used to like going out for a ride. He used to like going mushrooming to Epping Forest.

Can you remember any big celebrations?

The big celebration was VE Day. There was nobody indoors, they were climbing on bus shelters, it was absolutely unbelievable. Everyone was in the streets. I was just 15. I can remember the jubilation, and girls coming up to you in the street and kissing you.

What did you do when you left school?

I decided to leave school, then I went back to matriculate. I wanted to study European Law. There was a course going at London University, and I thought that would be a good idea. By the time I'd matriculated, I really didn't like law, and I decided I wanted to be a journalist and study English. Then somebody told me that if you want to be a journalist, the worst thing you can do is study English at university. A lot of journalists used to come into my father's place – Ross Sheppard was one of them. So I just went freelancing and afterwards probably found it good advice, certainly in those days.

My first break came inadvertently. At one time we used to go to the Oasis during the day (all the jazz musicians and people in show business went in the day). I met people there and got into sub-aqua, and eventually started writing about it and editing magazines. It all started at the Oasis, picking up pennies from the bottom.