

An Italian family in Mitcham



Maf Fogg



Ready for my first job, aged fourteen

Cover photo: My father, Carlo Palmieri, in front of his first barber's shop in Thornton Heath.

An Italian family in Mitcham

Contents

Coming to England	2
My parents	5
My sister and brothers	7
Childhood	9
Wartime	13
Being Italian	16
Teen years	19
Leaving home	22

Coming to England

I was born Mafalda Margaritte Palmieri in 1930, in Tynemouth Road, Mitcham in Surrey, the last of seven children. I was called Maf, but I never liked my name.

My parents were Italian and they both arrived from Italy around 1900. My mother's family was from Genoa and she came to England with her mother and her two brothers and four sisters when she was about twelve. My father's family was from Naples; he ran away from home and came on his own when he was just fourteen years old. My dad was a year older than my mother, so he must have arrived not long after her, although of course they didn't know each other then.

My father's name was Carmone Palmieri, and everyone called him Carlo. My dad's father was a baker in Naples; he was also a musician and played in a big brass band. He died when he was thirty-five and his wife then married the headmaster of a school. My dad had loved his father, but he hated his stepfather and he had a row with him which became quite physical, and that was when he ran away and decided to come to England.

My father was very lucky because when he arrived at Calais there was an Italian man there who saw that he was agitated and upset. He could see that my dad was Italian and so he spoke to him in his own language. Once they got to London, the man took him to some friends of his who were hairdressers and they trained him up in the business. After he married my mum, he owned his first little barber's shop in Thornton Heath, which he had until the first two children were born.

My mother's name was Elisabetta Assunta. She was the middle one of five sisters in her family and she was definitely the best looking of them all. My aunties were Julie, Josephine, Edie and then Vera. My mum was just nineteen or twenty and my dad was a year older when they got married in St Gregory's church in Fulham. They met through her brother, my uncle Johnnie, who had come into the hairdresser's shop that my father was working in.

The story of my mother's father was a very sad one. My grandfather had been a shoemaker in Genoa, where they had a lovely flat – they all lived in apartments rather than houses over there. His brother, who was already in London, persuaded my grandfather to come to England, telling him that he would make his fortune. But once he got here he ended up doing a sort of slave labour for his brother. In those days they used to go out and sell chestnuts in London, and this is what his brother forced him to do to make money for him. My grandfather didn't ever get back to his business of making shoes. Instead he worked for himself as a shoe repairer; I remember him mending all our shoes.

His brother's wife was also Italian. She was a beautiful woman but she was horrible – she was a peasant really. She destroyed all the letters that my granny wrote from Italy, so my grandfather didn't get them. She took the ones my grandfather wrote as well and my grandmother didn't hear from her husband for over two years.

When my grandparents first met up again in London they lived in a council flat in Fulham with their five daughters and two sons. But when I was a child they lived in a poor sort of a home in Tooting, in the top part of a house where my uncle and his wife lived underneath, but they always kept it beautifully clean. My granny was about eighty-six when she died after a fall in her house – she hit her head and never recovered. My grandfather was heartbroken and he went on for a few years only, and then he died towards the end of the second world war, when he was ninety-two.



My grandmother

My parents

My mother's first baby – a boy – died when he was just seven months old. After she had her next two boys, the family moved to Balham where my father owned another little hairdresser's shop in the High Street; they stayed there until my mum had two more boys. It was then that they moved to Mitcham where my sister, Gilda, and I were born.

My father was very dapper. He always wore a diamond ring and a diamond tie pin. He wouldn't go anywhere but Dunn's for his hats – either a trilby or a bowler hat that they all wore then. He had his suits made for him and wouldn't ever buy his suits off the peg. He belonged to the Druids, who were sworn to secrecy and almost like the freemasons, and it meant that he knew all the right people – he was very well connected.

My dad was a bit of a womaniser and later on in the marriage he had affairs. He was able to do what he liked and my mother knew all about it, but then he would be jealous around her; he didn't like anyone paying attention to her. They argued a lot and I remember lying in bed of a night and hearing them. But that's just the way he was and my mother was very loyal to him. She was more of a country girl; her life was just the home and looking after the children. My mum cooked for eight of us every day. She sometimes didn't have time to take her hat off when she came in from shopping before she started cooking.

When she was young my mother had thick hair, so long that she was able to sit on it, although she lost it later through all the things that she was to go through. We would brush it out for her and, when we had finished, she would twist it round at the back in a coil and put mother-of-pearl combs in it. She was very smart and later on she had her hair cut into a bob. She was a milliner so she made her own hats – the big-brimmed hats that they wore in those days in the 1940s and 1950s. She had tiny feet and wore lovely shoes with the bar cross-over and kitten heels. My father used to keep her beautifully dressed. They would go to dinners up in

An Italian family in Mitcham

London – with the Druids and other people my dad knew. He had become very friendly with a Jewish family who were tailors and when they went out for these dinners my mum had a beautiful coat that my dad had given her, and his friend had put real fur round my mother's collars and cuffs.

My parents were very different from each other. My father used to breed canaries and budgerigars. He would talk to the birds, and when he cleaned out the cages they pecked him and he would swear at them in his broken English. So, of course, the budgerigars would speak and swear in broken English as well. My mother didn't like that because she was a religious woman. She went to church on a Sunday and when the priest came round to the house she was so embarrassed with the birds that she would put them in the bathroom and cover them up during his visit.

My dad was really strict. There were times when he played with us, but he never made a fuss of us like my mother did. When they retired it was to a really nice maisonette in Crawley in Sussex. My father died when he was eighty-one years old and my mother eighteen years later, in 1985. My mother was a wonderful person and she was very good with all the grandchildren – they all loved her; she would come to stay every holiday and she never had to be alone.



My mother, Elisabetta

My sister and brothers

My sister Gilda was three and half years older than me so, although we went to the same school, we didn't do a lot together. She was very clever and got on well at school. She was a beautiful girl and looked more like my mum, whereas I looked more like my dad. She took up hairdressing as well and when she was nineteen she became the manageress of a lovely hairdressing salon in Balham.

There was two years between each of my brothers. Their Italian names were Giuseppe, who was the eldest, then there was Carmone, Alfredo, and Eduardo. We called them Joe, Charlie, Alf and Ted. Joe was eighteen when I was born, but all my brothers were still living at home when I was growing up, so there were eight of us in the house.

My father made sure that whatever the boys took to and really liked, they served an apprenticeship in it, and they all had their own businesses in the end. My two eldest brothers both learnt the hairdressing trade like my father and set up their own businesses. My father's family had been very musical and, although he didn't play himself, he wanted his sons to all learn musical instruments. He took them up to London for music lessons with a professor there. I also started piano lessons with a Mr Green in Bayswater, but things just petered out. I was nine when the war broke out, so that was a difficult time.

Joe played the violin beautifully, and he ended up working in all the theatres in London. But when the talkies came along in the cinemas, the theatres didn't do so well, so he played in various jazz bands and dance bands. Charlie was also very musical and he played the piano and the accordion, and he worked in Italian clubs up in London. We always had a piano at home that he used to play and he composed his own songs. He played with Geraldo, who was one of the most popular dance band leaders in the 1930s.

My third brother, Alf, was different from the others. He was very tall, like his grandfather – about 6'2". He loved to cook and to

be in the kitchen with Mum. My father knew an Italian woman who had a lovely restaurant in Balham, so my dad got him started off with her and Alf learnt how to cook; he learnt to speak Italian fluently as well while he was there. Alf was very clever, very quick, and the woman left the restaurant to him eventually. His wife, Mary, helped him in the restaurant and after they broke up he kept the restaurant; later on he went to London and worked in various restaurants there. He became the head waiter at Scott's, which was then in Coventry Street in Piccadilly Circus. Scott's was the hub of the West End social scene at the time and all the stars used to go in there. Alf ended up with his own sandwich bar in Leicester Square just by the Talk of the Town, and he did very well. He lived in Bayswater and made a fortune before he retired.

Ted, the youngest one, was ten years older than me, and was a real character. He was always messing about with motor bikes and cars; in fact, he would take anything to pieces. Dad wanted him to open his own business and sent him to serve an apprenticeship in motor mechanics for two years. When Ted was working as a mechanic he was dreadful with his girlfriends. He would bring them round to dinner at our house but then, because he was tired from work, he would fall asleep. Charlie had to walk the girls home, but they never minded.

By the time he was in his thirties, Ted had a smart showroom in Kingston and Knightsbridge with lots of flash cars. He loved horse riding, which he took up when he was about twenty, and he could do anything with a horse. He had no fear whatsoever and worked as a stunt man in different locations. He didn't get married until he was forty, and was working in Spain when he met his wife, Maria.

I was very shy as a girl. If I was on a bus or tube train and anyone was looking at me or staring at me, I just had to get off. I had lots of girlfriends from school and we would go skating in Streatham or go to the cinema, but they led a quieter life than I did. I had a big family; the boys have their friends round a lot, so there was always something going on in our house and that was my life.

Childhood

We moved from Tynemouth Road in Mitcham when I was about six months old and the family's next house was in Fleming Mead in Mitcham, where we stayed until we got bombed out during the war. My first memory was of my mother letting me put butter on my bread when I couldn't see higher than the table. I was about three years old and I must have felt really grown up. The other early memory I have of about the same age is that my grandmother had crocheted me a tangerine-coloured dress with panels, so that when I turned round it flared out.

We had a lovely life in Fleming Mead and I had a very happy childhood. There was no traffic in the road, so my friends and I used to go out with our marbles and tops and whips. We had parks around us and there was the Colliers Wood recreation ground where we could go on the swings. In the summer holidays about seven of us friends would go out about eleven o'clock or eleven-thirty in the morning with our sandwiches and my mother told us when we had to get back, about four o'clock for our tea.

My brothers used to spoil me. Alf would take me out on his days off and he would always buy me something. I remember once coming back with little black patent shoes. When I was about four or five he bought me a teddy bear which was about the same size as me and I loved it.

Ted took up horse riding and he used to take us girls every Sunday to stables in East Grinstead, where he knew a lot of people. I could just about trot on a horse, but he would make sure that I was dressed up in the whole riding outfit – you would have thought I was a show jumper. We went down there in about three carloads of us, and after the horse riding we would go to the Ravenswood Country Inn, which was a beautiful old hotel, set in the countryside, and have afternoon tea before coming home.



My sister, Gilda, and me at Alf's wedding

When I was four years old, I started at the Holy Family Convent in Tooting. The convent has closed down and there are flats there now. But in those days they had beautiful grounds and the garden was like something the National Trust might have. But I hated it and I was very unhappy at school; it was the most awful time for me. The convent was run mostly by French nuns from a cloistered order, which meant they didn't leave the convent. We weren't allowed to have mirrors anywhere in case we looked at ourselves. We played tennis, but they never taught us to swim because we couldn't expose our bodies. I rebelled a lot so I was always being punished. I thought the way they did things was sadistic. We used to have our lunches there; the nuns walked round and if we didn't hold our cutlery right they would hit our knuckles. One of the things we had to do as a punishment was all the washing up, because of course they didn't have dishwashers. We got punished even if we looked at them wrong.

They had a chapel and we had to attend mass all the time and kept the holy days. My mother made all the dresses for the girls' First Communion and never charged anything for them. Priests used to come to the convent every Friday to hear our confession so that we could take Holy Communion, and a beautiful tea was laid on for them. But there was nothing that we girls could do every week for us to confess and do penance every Friday. So we used to make up stories so that we could make our confession!

Our house was fitted out with nice carpets and curtains that my mum made. It was a very comfortable home which my mum kept beautifully because she loved nice things. It was a council place; there weren't many people who owned their own house at the time. Anyone like my father who owned a business was frightened to buy their own property. If you became ill and couldn't work it would be difficult.

My father grew vegetables in the garden and fresh figs, which we would just pick and peel and eat. When the war came we didn't really know what rationing was as we had all the vegetables and we kept about fifty chickens in the bottom of the garden – we used

An Italian family in Mitcham

to give eggs to all the neighbours. There was a railway line running along the bottom of our garden and the goods trains would come along with bananas and the men would throw them out for us.

We didn't have a fridge because in those days they had a marble cold slab to keep things fresh. We used to smell meat and other food to see if had gone off or if it was all right to eat. We had a lovely radiogram with a microphone, which we used to sing into, and we were the first ones in our street to have a television. Because my dad was in business we had one of the old-fashioned black phones on the wall. No one had a telephone on our road then so people used to come to our house and use it. We were allowed to phone friends but my brother Ted took liberties, and in the end my father put a padlock on it.



My father, Carlo, in Fleming Mead

Wartime

The war didn't affect us too badly in the first year, but the blitz started towards the end of 1940 when I was ten years old, with air raids and dog fights every night. It was during this period that they started evacuating children out of London. By then, my brothers were all working but my sister Gilda was still living at home. The blitz badly affected my life as a child. We couldn't really go anywhere special because we were frightened all the time; we would carry our gas masks with us and if the warning went off we had to rush and find a shelter. It made me very anxious and nervous.

When the bombing started my mother cleared one of the rooms in the house and put in an Anderson shelter. We had bunks and slept in there at night; it was bolted up and it was really quite frightening. We also used to go down to Clapham South underground, taking our sandwiches, and sleep on the platform. We would go at six o'clock every night and come out at half-past six in the morning. It was after we stopped going that there was a direct hit on the tunnels in Balham tube station in October 1940 and there was flooding into the underground at Clapham South. There were a lot of people killed when that happened.

My mother took us away to Bournemouth to be evacuated. The sea front had rolls of barbed wire all along the beach against enemy attack. We stayed at a terrible place and the son of the house was absolutely dreadful. His mother made a shepherd's pie one night and he put some toothpaste in it so that we couldn't eat it. And he used to put things above the door so that when we went through they fell down on us. So we only stayed for six weeks.

The doodlebugs – the V-1s – came over Mitcham from July 1944 to the beginning of the next year; they killed about sixty people in Mitcham and injured a lot more. In all, there were thousands of houses destroyed or badly damaged in Mitcham. They were really terrifying. The flying bombs would cause a huge explosion and completely demolish houses all around their impact

area. It was on the 11th July that a doodlebug fell in the garden of the house just opposite us. I was in the Anderson shelter with my sister Gilda and my sister-in-law, Maria, Alf's wife. And then the doodlebug came – it was so loud and then it just stopped and you had to wait for it to come down. We kept on saying, 'Come into the shelter, Mum,' but my mother was in the living room ironing shirts for my brother Charlie, because he was going away to work. The bomb fell in the garden of the house just opposite us and she got a lot of the blast. My mum was screaming but we couldn't get out because the shelter was bolted. I was hysterical and I remember my sister slapped me round the face.

After we were bombed out my nerves were very bad. It was a terrible time, most of all because of the effect on my mum. The blast from the doodlebug destroyed the retina in her eye and in those days they couldn't do anything for her. My dad was very good in his own way when it happened. He knew doctors in Harley Street in London as he was very well connected, so he took her there and he made sure that she had the best treatment. Eventually she had to go into hospital and she lost her sight in the end and had a false eye. I was about sixteen by then and that was a terrible thing for me. I was very attached to my mother and when it happened I remember thinking that life was just not worth living.

A lot of people were injured and there were three people killed as a result of the bomb in Temple Mead, including a girl who was out in the garden when it fell. She was the same age as me – thirteen. A lot of the houses were completely demolished or couldn't be repaired, including ours. In our house the blast left the stairs swinging and we had to be moved out.

After we got bombed out my mother went to live in Tooting with my granny, with my uncle and his family downstairs. My brother Joe's wife and her boy Paul had been evacuated to Reading, and I was sent to join her. But I was only there for a month. I was turned fourteen then and the farmer, who was a young married man, came into my bedroom one night. As a result, I didn't want to stay there

and I remember my sister-in-law packing everything up and we came home in a train. My brother got a cab to take him and his wife to Streatham, where he lived, and he told the taxi driver to drop me off at Tooting Junction.

After the taxi left me at the trolley bus stop the warning siren went off and I was terrified. I managed to get the trolley bus and when I got to Tooting Broadway, I just ran to the house where my mother was staying, struggling and carrying my case. The ack-ack guns were going by then and I finally just fell into the house, with my mother and I both crying.

After that my mother went out every day looking for places for us to live. She eventually found a house in Sandy Lane, which was the other side of the London Road and right near Figge's marsh. The house was private when she found it but the council requisitioned it and took it over. The bombing still went on after we moved there and we had a Morrison shelter then; they were steel structures designed so that you could sleep under them at night, and with a top that you could use as a table. The direct hit on Temple Mead affected me a lot, and my nerves were bad later on. But we just had to get on with life.

I was fifteen when the war ended. We just thought, 'Thank God for that!' and it was wonderful. Everyone had street parties to celebrate, with tables out in the middle of the street, with spam and fish paste sandwiches, and coconut sponge cake. Soon after, things started to be good again, although there was rationing for quite a while. Sandy Lane was in a lovely green area, and I lived there until I was twenty-six, when I got married.

Being Italian

My father used to go back to Naples from time to time to see his family, although my mum didn't go with him. She had the children and then the war came and, even after the war was over, things weren't easy with the rationing. The first time I went to Italy was after my husband Joe died; then I went over to Sorrento and from there to Naples.

But we definitely felt Italian because my mum and dad used to speak Italian to each other. I could understand what they were saying but I didn't speak it because they talked to us children in English. They were always rowing in Italian – very typically Italian, very hot-tempered. There could be quite a lot of tension in the house because of the arguing, and my father used to have his 'turns'. The boys were always arguing with each other and with him, and they used to fight sometimes. If they had a conversation about anything it just used to turn fiery. One had one opinion and the other had another opinion and then it would quieten down again. Ted was the one that used to answer my mum back; I don't know how she stood for it. But he was like that. He would take my dad's drink and put water back in the bottle so that he wouldn't notice.

My granny couldn't speak any English. She was a good needlewoman and used to crochet around the edges of pillow slips and the sheets, and she would crochet the table runners and doilies in the traditional way. When they lived in Fulham she sent all five of her daughters to Kensington to be trained up as tailoresses and milliners. They used to get up at half-past six to go, and in all sorts of weathers. It was miles for them to get there, but they didn't mind. Later on, they didn't get jobs, because in those days the girls just got married and had children, but they did dressmaking for other people from home. My mum did a lot of needlework to make more money so we were always very comfortable. I can remember her staying up until the early hours of the morning to get something done.

My grandparents were both lovely people and very kind. When I was about thirteen I used to go round and have a meal with them in Tooting. There were a lot of Italians around there who they made friends with. My granny always cooked beautiful Italian food – you could smell it when you rang the bell at the door. My mother was also a very good Italian cook. We had pizzas and pasta, lovely meat rolled and stuffed with garlic, stews, salt cod and fish cooked in gravy and fried dumplings. We had plaited bread, focaccia with olive oil and bread with hard boiled eggs, and doughnuts in oil with castor sugar.

Christmas in our house was wonderful. It didn't start until Christmas Eve, when we put the decorations up. My mother would do everything herself, except the bread. It was my dad that made the bread because his father's family were Italian bakers and he had learnt how to bake before he left Italy. When I first took my husband Joe to our Sandy Lane house to meet my parents before we were married, he saw the food and he couldn't believe his eyes; he had never seen or tasted anything like it before in his life. And once he had tasted the wine, that was that. He loved it all.

I can remember when I was about eight or nine staying for the weekend with some Italian families we knew in Kennington. We used to go to the Italian procession of our Lady of Mount Carmel in Clerkenwell in London, which was held in July every year, except during the war years. It was an area called 'little Italy,' and there used to be a lot of families from Naples there. The procession started out from St Peter's Italian church with music and religious statues and they had lots of stalls selling Italian food along the side of the road.

Being Italian brought difficult times as well. When Mussolini joined Hitler in 1940 there was a lot of anti-Italian feeling and Italian men were interned as 'enemy aliens' in different camps around the country. When my mother took us away to Bournemouth she didn't realise that as so-called enemy aliens we weren't allowed to go more than five miles outside London without notifying the police.

The police came for my mother and took her to court and she was fined five pounds, which was a lot of money then.

My brother Alf had a bust of Mussolini in his bedroom, but it was Charlie that they went after, because he played in the Italian clubs in London. Charlie went to prison for nine months, and they only let him free on the basis that he joined the Pioneer Corps, and what they did was to dig trenches. Being in prison affected my brother badly, but when he came out he started another hairdressing business and moved to Crawley, where my mum and dad went to live eventually. Charlie wasn't a very forceful person and he went very quiet after he was in prison.

My youngest brother, Ted, had joined up in the Royal Artillery, but he reacted to my brother's imprisonment and refused to put his uniform back on, and said he wouldn't go back in the army again. He deserted and was free for about eighteen months, but in the end the Military Police – the Redcaps – found him at my granny's. Someone must have informed on him because they came up to him where he was working in the garage and said: 'You're Edward Palmieri!' And they took him away and beat him up.

When Charlie was taken to prison, my father told the police, 'It's me you want, not him,' but he was left alone. He had a business in Balham and he was liked and respected by all the local tradespeople and other businessmen – even the police respected him.

Teen years

I left school when I was fourteen, as you could then. Being the last of seven children, I was spoilt and didn't go straight out to work. My first job, when I was about fifteen, was in a lingerie shop called Jax in Tooting, where I earned six shillings and seven pence a week. I worked there for just a few months and then, when I was sixteen, worked in a dry cleaners shop for a few months but then left as I didn't like it. Then I started in the gown department of the big Cooperative store near Trinity Road past Tooting. But I didn't like it either, so on the first day I went to see the manageress at lunchtime and told her I was leaving.

Alf opened a restaurant in Trinity Road called 'The Atlas' and I went to work as a waitress there. It was silver service and I wore a black dress with a little organza apron with the bows. It didn't open of a night but we used to do lunches for people, such as bank managers and business people. I worked there for a long time and made quite a bit of money because we had good tips; I had my twentieth birthday in the restaurant. It was really busy and we worked hard; we had to see to the laundry and polish the silver. I would work some evenings for a couple of hours when they had political party meetings there. Alf was a Labour Party supporter, but he used put up Conservative Party posters so that he could get the business.

Later on I worked for the mother of Dennis Goodwin in a gown shop next door to the Locarno dance hall in Streatham. This was in the early 1950s, and Dennis Goodwin was working with Bob Monkhouse writing radio and television comedy scripts. The Locarno was one of the most popular dance halls in London; Jo Loss used to play there with his band and all the best bands of the day would come down. We used to go out into the garden behind the shop and talk to the bands when they were working next door. Both Dennis and Bob would come into the shop and chat, and Dennis ended up marrying Barbara, the young Saturday girl.

I had a good time as a teenager because my brother Ted knew lots of people. He used to go to parties and he would say, 'What are you doing tonight, Maf? Are you doing anything?' And I would say, 'Not really.' So I'd dress myself up and go out with him. I met a lot of his friends, and we would all go off, for example to Brighton.

I wasn't really allowed to come home late. My dad wasn't so worried about the boys, although they weren't supposed to come in after one or two o'clock in the morning. There was the famous Stork Club above the Locarno which was fantastic – all the posh jazz bands and the celebrities went there. My brother Joe was a member, and if I was at the Locarno and he was there, he would say, 'Come up to the Stork club.' And if he was driving he would give me a lift home, so I'd be all right.

When I started to go dancing at the Locarno I met a lot of Italian boys there who worked up in London. There were English boys, but we always used to sit around in our own little group of Italians. And we would all pile into the cars on a Sunday and go to places like Box Hill. It was all very friendly – much more innocent than now. And, anyway, I was frightened to do anything because of my dad; he was so strict. When I was nineteen I won the Miss Locarno competition and got a photo taken in a studio in Streatham.

Fred paid for me to have singing lessons up in Oxford Street, and I used to sing at the Locarno with a dance band. And then we got a group – with a pianist and a drummer, me and a man who sang like Frank Sinatra. We used to sing songs like 'Blue Moon' and 'Baby, it's cold outside,' and then we went to a studio and made some records. But my father was on my tail the whole time and didn't like it. Then we were booked to go away to sing in a theatre and my father said, 'You're not going!' So I stopped it and the group just used to come to my house and sing with the piano.

I didn't really have any serious boyfriends in those days. When I worked in Streatham in the gown shop, I became friendly with the window dresser, Lily, who lived in Cheam. I was standing by the bus stop waiting for her one night and this big tall fellow called Bradley stopped. After that he would come by on his motor bike

An Italian family in Mitcham

and chat to us and in the end I went out with him for about two months. I took him to Charlie's new flat in Glebe Court one evening and Charlie got on well with him. But he was a policeman, a certain type, and I remember thinking that he was on his way out as a boyfriend.

Then when I started going to the Locarno I met John, who was a very nice chap, tall, dark and handsome. He was training to be an accountant and didn't have a lot of money, but he was always very smart. He was a good ballroom dancer but I wasn't really into that. He wanted to get serious, so I finished with him. After that, he kept on ringing the house and my mother was very upset with me. 'You shouldn't do that,' she said. 'That's how people get murdered.'



**My twentieth birthday at Alf's restaurant,
with my niece, Marion.**

Leaving home

I was twenty-two when I met Joe Fogg. I was at the Locarno with my sister-in-law, sitting at one of the tables where they served you drinks. He came up and asked me to dance about five times, and I got fed up with him in the end. He said, 'Do you come here on a Sunday?' and I said 'Yes.'

Joe said he'd like to see me again and I said I'd go down the next Sunday. Then Joe said, 'I don't even know what your name is.' And I just replied, 'Jean,' thinking of a name quickly. I gave him my telephone number, but the next day he rang up and my mother answered as I wasn't there, and he said, 'Is Jean there? She said, 'You've got the wrong number... Well, it's the right telephone number but I haven't got a daughter called Jean. It's Mafalda.' He said, 'Who?'

I didn't go down to the Locarno on a Sunday for another six months. I became friendly with a girl called Pat who came to work at the shop. She lived in a flat in Streatham – her father was a dentist. She had married a Canadian and gone out to Canada, but they lived in the outback, so she left him after two years and came back. I used to go to the coast with her sometimes on a Sunday. We would get the train, say, to Brighton and meet people on the beach there.

Then one Sunday I was at her flat and she said, 'Let's go down to the Locarno and have a coffee on the veranda.' You could sit up there and look down on the dance floor. Joe was there, and he came up to me and said, 'Hello, Jean,' and I wanted the ground to open up. He said, 'Why did you do that to me?' Then he said, 'Do you mind if I join you?' He was very nice and polite, as they were in those days. After that we went out to the pictures and it started from there, but I didn't go mad for him straightaway.

Joe was seven years older than me. He was a Deptford boy and had a terrible life when he was young. His mother died from a heart attack at thirty-three when he was only eleven years old. His father married three times; Joe didn't have a home really – he lived

with his granny or with his sister. He spent the war in India as a sergeant with the Air Force Police, at one time acting as a bodyguard for Jinnah, who was the first president of Pakistan when it was formed in 1947. When he came back he got experience as a painter and decorator and then joined the council and worked his way up. After the war the council requisitioned abandoned and damaged property, and his job was supervising about 400 men in a large council area, checking that the right equipment was in place and the repairs were done right.

I didn't take Joe home to meet my parents until the following Easter – about six months after we met. The Italians really go to town for Easter with all the family coming round. My mum was pleased but my dad didn't treat him very well because he wanted me to marry an Italian. Anyway, Joe met the family, and they were all laughing and shaking hands. He had a glass of wine and was absolutely mesmerised by all the food that was laid out.

We got engaged, but we didn't get married for two and a half years. We went around looking for somewhere to live. He took me to Peckham to look at the houses there, but they were awful and I said there was no way that I was going to live there. We got married in 1956 when I was twenty-six and Joe was thirty-three. We found a nice Victorian house in Perry Rise in Forest Hill, and I worked for the first two years until my son was born. And that was the start of a very happy time for me as a housewife and mother, with our two children, with lots of friends, coffee mornings and parties.

We still saw a lot of the family. My sister stayed in Mitcham, my eldest brother, Joe, lived in Streatham and Alf lived in Balham. Charlie moved to Crawley near my parents, but we all kept in touch and visited each other as the family got larger. My parents would often come to our house, and then all of them used to come over for a big meal on Boxing Day. It was a simple, lovely life, and we were very happy.



**Joe and I with our son, Nicky,
after his christening**



© Maf Fogg
London, March 2016