

Amber Djemal interview for the Haringey Vanguard project

EXTRACT: 00:00 – 11:40

AMBER: I was born in a maternity hospital in Muswell Hill and my parents are originally from Cyprus, but they came to London in 1940s and settled in, well at first, they were in the kind of West End. Then they moved out to Kilburn then they moved to Kilburn and they moved to Muswell Hill and I was born there but very soon after I was born, they moved to Finchley, so I grew up in the suburbs of North London in Finchley in the 1960s. And um it was a very predominantly white area, and we were the only non-white family on our road until I was in about my late teens and then an Asian family moved in opposite us but up till then I was very aware that we were different. My parents only spoke Turkish to each other; we only mixed with other Turkish Cypriots; we only ate Turkish Cypriot food. So, you know, our neighbours knew we were different did make comments about ‘ooh I smelt something quite different last night what were you cooking?’ and stuff like that, so I was quite aware at that stage that we weren’t like a lot of the other people in the area that I grew up.

VERONICA MCKENZIE And did you go to like an all-white school?

AMBER: Mainly there some, there was like um, I would 1% of us were not white but everyone else was white at my primary school which was in West Finchley. It was called Moss Hall school. And when I arrived at school, I couldn’t speak English because I’d been with my mum up until I was five. She was working from home. She was a seamstress and so used to do all her sewing at home when I was born um so, I’d grown up talking with her and she spoke in Turkish to me and I spoke in Turkish back so when I arrived at school I didn’t actually know English but I picked it up quite quickly and started to fit in but was always I think um other I suppose because I’d started without being able to speak to people.

VM: And so, did that affect your confidence then?

AMBER: Yeah, I think I was a very shy, very withdrawn child, very scared of the world. So I used to kind of hide behind my mum’s skirt literally if strangers came to the door or anything like that. So yeah, I think it did affect my confidence.

VM: and then so in terms of growing up as a teenager in Finchley (you were in Muswell Hill by then? Or were you in Finchley?)

AMBER: Finchley yeah in Finchley.

VM: As a teenager what was that like?

AMBER: Um, well I was, my parents were very strict and in terms of Turkish Cypriot culture girls are not meant to go out with boys or anybody you are very much enclosed in the house. So, when all my friends started going to parties and cinema and things like that I wasn’t really allowed to go. I wasn’t allowed to go on...I joined...my mum joined me up in the Brownies and I wasn’t allowed to go on any of the overnight camping trips or anything like that. So yeah, I was quite a different teenager to most of the teenagers I knew because

they'd started to do things like smoking and drinking alcohol and I just wasn't allowed to do any of that. And I, I kind of, although I was very strictly policed by my parents, I think I also policed myself and knew that I wasn't like my friends at school and so I had to behave in a certain way.

VM: So, you were not ahm envious of them?

AMBER: Oh yeah, I was very envious of them and I started to be really rebellious at school. I think because my home life was so strict and actually, I did go to a very strict school, 'cause back then in the early 70s when I went to secondary school there was the 11+ and if you passed the 11+ at the end of your primary schooling you went to grammar school if you passed, and if you didn't pass you went to secondary modern. This was before the comprehensive system came in. And I passed my 11+ and went to a grammar school that was really strict. But also had no idea about difference.

So, it was strict in terms of, we could only wear knee-high white socks; we had to...our skirt had to be 1, at least 1 inch below our knees. Boys had their hair measured every Friday and it had to be 1 inch off their collar and we were really policed in that school. But I still, I think with both sets of areas of my life being so strict I started to become really rebellious at around the age of 13, 14. And decided that I was going to be like the other young people around me and I wanted to do stuff that they were doing. And although I couldn't do it in terms of partying, I could act up in school. So, I started to really act up and get into a lot of trouble all the time.

VM: So were you back chatting the teachers and all that?

AMBER: Yeah, talking all the time at the back of the class not concentrating. We weren't allowed out of school at lunchtime unless we were going home for dinner. And I wasn't a going home for dinner person I was meant to have school dinners. But we forged - me and my two friends that just hung out together Lesley, Mimi and me were just like the naughty ones at school. And we forged a path to get out at lunchtimes and we used to go and uhm I don't know just like steel bread and butter from a shop and go somewhere and make ourselves sandwiches and chat to the boys from the local secondary modern school, which was meant to be like 'oh you don't chat to them'. I mean there was a real class thing at my school so mainly middle-class people went to the grammar school and more working-class people went to the secondary modern school, so there was this real divide, and we were like 'oh we don't believe in that we're going to talk to him or her or whatever' so uhm yeah I think that rebellious streak in me really started in my early teens.

And then by the time I was...we were just about to do our O-levels umm I started to think about kinda feminism. So this was the mid 70s by now and that wave of feminism that came out sort of late 60's early 70's had sort of somehow come into my...come into view for me. And I started to think about things like 'well why am I not allowed to wear trousers at school and only the boys can wear trousers?'. So, a few of us got together and decided we were going to take action and we dressed up in the boys school uniform one day and just arrived at school in them. And my school wasn't the type of place that took something like that lightly and we were suspended from school. But then the local paper took up the story and

it kind of spread a bit like wildfire around the schools of Finchley. And other people started doing actions and I know this gay guy called Danny now and he was at a school quite close by to there when he was young and he said 'oh I remember I dressed up in a skirt and went to school 'cause of the action you all took at Woodhouse'. So yes, I was suspended from school for about three weeks I think just before my O-levels because of this action but as a result, Women's Voice, which was the feminist part of the Socialist Workers' Party, they came and started selling their magazine outside our school because of the action that we'd been involved in. And I started buying this magazine every week and just like devouring all this stuff about feminism and it didn't relate to me in any way because it's all about white feminists, but I still was like 'oh wow so there's women all over saying they're not happy with their lives and their lives should be different and I think my life should be different' so I just thought feminism was the bees knees. But it was a very white feminism, but I think at that stage I didn't really necessarily realise that.

[I was] Really held back as a girl child in my family like, my brother was allowed to go out and do whatever he wanted to do. I couldn't go out anywhere. I wasn't allowed to talk to boys uhm...and I wasn't majorly interested in boys necessarily but I still kind of thought everyone else was going out with boys so I thought well I want to go out with boys but I wasn't able to, and I was very much, I had a curfew like you have to be home by this time and I started to think 'oh this is sexist'. Oh you know, I didn't even know what that word meant until I started reading Women's Voice I was like 'oh there is sexism in my family.'

And weirdly my parents didn't have that kind of um- I don't know - that role of my dad was a "He Man" and my mum was the "little woman" at all. They were very different to that. My dad was a really quiet man, and my mum was really loud and fiery and she kind of what people these, you know call 'wore the pants' I mean that's such a sexist term, but she definitely ruled the roost in our house. But I still understood that it wasn't just about individuals, there was like...because I was reading Women's Voice, I understood that it was something to do with structures and society I didn't really understand what that meant at that stage, but I knew it was beyond, it was something bigger than just how my family lived their life kind of thing.

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