

**A Life
in Two
Acts**

A Life in Two Acts

Judith Neill

as told to Peter Verstappen

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by Hugh Neill

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Judith, April 2026

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Foreword

Over the past ten years or so I've worked with Hugh Neill in a string of theatre productions for Wakefield Country Players, and through Hugh I've come to know Judith, initially as a loyal opening-night-front-row member of the audience, and later as a generous and perceptive critic of our work. Judith's radiance and zest for life have charmed me, but it was not until I read Alan Charlton's biography of Apollo Cokkinis that I began to appreciate just how extraordinary Judith's life has been.

About a year ago I suggested to Judith that she tells her story as a memoir, a recollection of events and people over her long, memorable life, and so for about three months we fell into a Monday routine: I'd turn up at the house on Nile Street for morning tea with Judith and Hugh, then Judith and I retired to the lounge where we recorded her story while Hugh cooked us dinner, which he served promptly at noon, with typical Fawlty flourish.

An obliging AI bot transcribed the sixteen hours of interviews into about a hundred and twenty pages of verbatim text, which is the story you are about to read. In preparing the memoir for print my job has mostly been ironing out the wrinkles, adapting the oral story to a readable form. Throughout, I have stayed true to the tale, with Judith (and Hugh) closely involved at every step.

Judith's son Jonathan also read the draft and gave helpful advice on a few points.

As with any memoir of a long rich life, this story touches many other lives. Some readers, especially close family, may have different memories of the events and people in this book, but that is their story. This is Judith's.

My thanks to Jonathan Alexander for the cover design and for smoothing the way through publication, and to Sylvia Huxtable for proofreading. Thanks to Hugh for your impeccable memory for details and your fine dinners. And my thanks and gratitude to you, Judith, for being so bold in telling your story.

Peter Verstappen

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Beginnings

I was born on June 23rd, 1933, in London. My mother remembers she had a very nice dinner, roast chicken and strawberries and cream, then off she went to give birth to me at a nursing home in Cricklewood, North London. She called me Judith Mary Waldy Mason. 'Mary' was from Mother's sister, Violet Mary, and 'Waldy' was Mother's maiden name. So that was me – Judith Mary Waldy Mason.

My parents, Dr C.L. Mason and Dr Dorothy Mason, had previously owned a house in Os naburg Terrace, in London NW1, and that was going to be destroyed, so they moved across to Colosseum Terrace, which was part of Albany Street, a long street with buses going back and forth, right beside Regent's Park. Our house was number fourteen, the last house in Colosseum Terrace, four storeys and a basement, with the front door opening directly onto the street.

The basement had a coal cellar, the coal delivered through a manhole in the pavement, and a two-person flat. On the ground floor was my father's medical practice, with a surgery and waiting room. Part of the waiting room was a pharmacy, so the doctor could write a prescription and take it directly to the pharmacist. At the back was a bathroom and a small bedroom, where for a while my father's assistant lived, a Welshman with a very Welsh name, Hugh Jones, I think.

We lived on the floors above the surgery. From the ground floor a long flight of stairs led to a half-mezzanine with the kitchen, then another flight of stairs to the second floor dining room and drawing room, which was a large room, with three big windows, French windows you could open and step out onto a balcony facing the street; then more stairs to another half-mezzanine with an airing cupboard, a lavatory and a bathroom with a bath – we didn't have showers in England in those days. More stairs led to the third floor, with a bedroom on the left and the main big bedroom, my parents' room, on the right.

Here's a curiosity: the main bedroom had a speaking tube connected to an opening by the front door, for after-hours patients. People came to the door at all hours, called through the tube for the doctor and my father went down to them. Years later, when it was my bedroom, we heard a strange whistling one night coming from the back of one of the cupboards. Investigating, we rediscovered the old speaking tube, still connected to the front door; somebody on the street was whistling into it. We couldn't do much about it, so we left it. Perhaps it remains there to this day.

From the third floor another flight of stairs led to a landing with a window at the back of the house. Apparently when I was a baby my mother opened that window and put me out on the roof in my cot to get some air because we had no garden to go into. A final flight of stairs led to the top floor, with one long narrow room and then a bigger room, the nursery, and a back room where the nanny slept.

The nanny was our only live-in servant. We had other day staff; a receptionist for the medical practice, a cleaner and somebody who came to make tea.

So that was my house, where I lived with my parents and my