

Chloe Price's Batmitzvah Project 2023

For my Batmitzvah project, my family took a trip to Amsterdam in February half term. We wanted to find out what we could about Grandpa David's mother's family who used to live there. Grandpa David told me a lot about his Amsterdam family, in the weeks before he died in January. Grandpa's mother was Flora, (born to Rose Citroen) (one of my middle names is Rose), whose family moved to Amsterdam from Silesia (while Flora moved to Whitechapel, East London). Flora's side of the family were the Limoenmans, and-like Otto Frank's family (Anne Frank's Dad), moved from Germany to Amsterdam with the rise of threat to Jewish people.

Grandpa was born in 1929 in London, and his two older brothers (Arnie and Ronnie) travelled with Flora to visit her Amsterdam family in the 1930's. Arnie and Ronnie often talked to Grandpa when he was little about their visit, and Grandpa said he really wanted to go to visit Amsterdam too. Flora promised Grandpa a trip after the war, but he never went as the family there all died in the war. Grandpa told me the stories of how the Limoenmans (originally fruit sellers in Germany) changed their name when they moved to Holland to Citroën (citroën means lemon in Dutch); and that this was the same family who set up the Citroën car company in Paris. Andre-Gustav Citroën who invented the special double chevron car gears, was from the same family and lived in Paris. This was why Mum's first car was a white Citroen AX when she was young.

Mum and I planned this project to discover what we could about Flora's family in Amsterdam. Mum didn't think we would find out very much. All we knew before the trip was that none of the family survived World War 2; we knew their surname was Limoenman or Citroën or Limoenman-Citroën, that they lived in a vibrant community on a canal (near Anne Frank's house) called OnbekenderGracht, and that they walked to the nearby 'Old Synagogue' to pray. And the link with the Citroën car company.

Grandpa David was the youngest of 13 siblings, and his stories would be the last of his generation. I knew we had to somehow find out what happened, to try to keep his stories alive.

Thanks to a friend of Grandma Daphne who is a Dutch historian, we learned that a thriving Jewish community lived in OnbekenderGracht; that the 'Old' synagogue' was the Ashkenazi synagogue, which is now the Jewish Museum. And that the family would have died soon after the Nazi Invasion in May 1940. They did not go into hiding, like Anne Frank's family did, as far as we know. Hearing similar stories, they would have been rounded up by the Nazi troops and taken in cattle trucks to the Westerbork work camp - and then onto concentration camps in the East, with the 100,000 other Amsterdam Jews and other minority groups.



Freddie on OnbekenderGracht, the street where our family lived

We rented old fashioned bikes, with Theo in a little trailer, and we found the street on the canal where the family lived, OnbekenderGracht - meaning a 'no named' canal. It had elegant tall thin houses, with bikes and canalboats alongside. We tried to guess which the family house might have been. It was a very sad moment to all stand there quietly and imagine that we should have had lots of family there to visit. We cycled on to the Hermitage Museum, behind which is the 2013 Holocaust memorial, each brick bearing the name of each Jew who had died. Me and Freddie found two whole columns of bricks with names of the Citroën family on them, with birthdays on too, and Mum and Dad also saw lots of familiar names they knew.

Grandpa described the family walking to the *old synagogue*, which is now the Jewish Museum.



Before the war, there were actually four synagogues, built next each other. This was the place the Ashkenazi Jews like Grandpa's family used to visit, also Cantor Heller's mother's family.

The holocaust memorial in Amsterdam

The Portuguese Synagogue was the synagogue for the Sephardi Jews, just across the road. This was very grand and ornate inside (me Freddie and Theo climbed up to the top level), and it is a synagogue used for the Jews who live in Amsterdam now.



Inside the Portuguese Synagogue

That night, Mum and Dad cycled to the north of town to Neni, an Israeli restaurant in a 1930's Citroen garage, thanks to Mum's friend Sasha who said it was a nice place to eat. Mum said it was very trendy, and the old art deco car showroom had a Limoenman sign on the wall, and old pictures of the Citroen DS car in the bar. It had huge industrial interiors and it was full of animated local people. Mum and Dad met the head waiter Louis, who proudly shared the story of the building. He recounted the familiar stories that Rudolph Limoenman Citroen built the Citroen showroom in 1930. 'He had changed his name to Citroen after being a family of lemon sellers...' Louis showed Mum and Dad the car ramp where the cars used to drive into the top level of the showroom.

The next day, we went to visit the Anne Frank House. I had read her diary, but Freddie and Theo of course had not yet. We then took a canal boat trip: our tour guide showed us the modern opera house built on the land in Waterloopleein - which was the most densely Jewish area. We had seen the map in Anne's house where each dot represented 10 Jewish homes. The German soldiers burnt the houses here after the Allied invasion in 1945. Our family's road, OnbekenderGracht was slightly away from there, so did not burn down.



Mum and I on a boat trip on one of the 200 canals in Amsterdam

When we came back to London after this trip, I felt very sad. Grandpa died 2 weeks before we went, so we couldn't tell him what we found out. He would have been really interested. Grandpa talked a lot in his final weeks about his mother's family there, and I think I understand why he never wanted to go there and find all this out himself. He didn't live his life in the past, and the stories of persecution his mother told him haunted him all his life. He wanted them to live on, but he couldn't face finding out himself. It is very important that we keep these stories going, and tell our younger family too, when they are ready to find out.

Chloe Price, July 2023