

## **A LETTER FOR MY FATHER**

You never knew your father. He died when you were three years old. You and your six older siblings were brought up by your mum, an immigrant from Russia who barely spoke any English.

Your childhood was spent in a squalid slum in Whitechapel in the heart of London's East End. Your mum kept a stall in Petticoat Lane market where she sold anything that might sell. Hatpins, for example, were very popular as women used them to give themselves abortions.

When I was growing up, you told me how you didn't own a pair of shoes until you started school and even then they were a pair handed down from an older brother.

You'd said how you used to escape to Whitechapel Library. Not only because you loved books but also because the library was a warm and welcoming place to be. And there were no bed bugs there.

Another safe place where you spent much of your time was at the local youth club and it was there in a convoluted way that you met mum. One of her brothers told you that she was the youngest of his five sisters. He had said that they were all spoken for and that she was the prettiest of them all. You hung around near her home in the hope of getting a good look at her. When you first saw her, it was love at first sight, you said.

It took seven years of courtship for you to save up for mum's diamond engagement ring – one I wear to this very day.

Mum's parents welcomed you into their home and there you experienced normal family life. A household where everyone sat together round the table to eat. And where each of the ten children, even if they didn't have their own bed, only had to share it with one other person.

Once I myself became a parent I understood you better. How hard it must have been to grow up without a dad and with a mother who was never around. And yet you were a good father, despite your tough upbringing. You were loving, gentle and playful. I can't remember you ever raising your voice to me. You were always kind. And you gave me a love of English literature and poetry that has nourished me all these years.

I never had the chance to thank you when you were still alive. You died when I was hundreds of miles away from home and we never had the chance to say goodbye.

Thank you dad for helping to make me the woman I am today.

**Inspired by the jazz title track, "Song for my Father".**