



# TEA WITH OONA KING

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When Oona King opens a sturdy front door and invites me into her converted Mile End pub, what I see is a mixed-race woman whose ethnicity combines both black and white genes. What I get is a black woman who is also Jewish.

Whilst Oona makes tea I look around. ‘Downstairs’ is one large room, filled with light. I sit at a table made for full family dinners and note the piano, billiard table and the original bar, now housing a kitchen sink. Floor to ceiling bookcases encase a library spanning multicultural, multilingual interests. An African print hangs near to a hamsa performing protective duties by the front door.

Oona’s diaries, *House Music* have already told me that she decided to become an MP aged five, joined the Labour Party aged 14 and swept into the House of Commons in 1997, aged 29, as the elected Labour Member of Parliament representing constituents of Bethnal Green and Bow.

In that 1997 photograph of women MPs celebrating Labour’s sweeping victory with Tony Blair, Oona stands central. This particular ‘Blair Babe’, it becomes clear, has been absorbed by the politics of human rights, justice and equality for most of her life – a passion which continues, despite being ousted from her Parliamentary seat in the 2005 election by Respect Coalition candidate, George Galloway. After dismissing the erstwhile *Big Brother* contestant as a

‘wasted talent’, we do not mention his name again.

Oona King’s family lore comprises first-hand accounts of overcoming poverty, persecution and prejudice. Her paternal great-great grandparents were slaves. Her father’s parents met at the Tuskagee Institute, established to teach former slaves. They produced seven highly achieving sons, one of whom was Oona’s father, Preston, whose request for a deferment from military service earned him 40 years of exile from the United States – until Oona headed a campaign and Bill Clinton revoked the injustice through a presidential pardon.

Jenny Stern, Oona’s maternal grandmother, a half-Irish, half-Scottish working-class Catholic Geordie, undertook the full Jewish conversion to marry Oona’s grandfather, Sidney Stern. The Stern side of the family had arrived

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in Newcastle circa 1908, fleeing Hungarian pogroms. Family stories float down about dire poverty in a tenement where 13 children slept head-to-toe in one bed, “girls one end and boys the other, divided by a sheet suspended from the clothes line”.

Photos are produced and the cultural expanse of Oona’s family lies before us. Great grandmother, Zillah Stern wears her sheitl. Husband Tiberio’s pre-war family portrait shows a group sporting uniforms of fascist Italy. King says, “It’s so insidious, the way that culture throws families one way or the other. So, I put these pictures together, to remind me.”

In *House Music* there is a section called ‘The Un-chosen’ which tells about her aunt and mother growing up on the wrong side of the social tracks, as daughters of a convert and from a poor

family. Oona describes her Auntie Miri and mother Hazel, as “the outcasts of the outcasts” in Newcastle’s Jewish community. Despite embracing Judaism “in a typically convert way” and “separating milchig from fleischig – tea-towels and everything – they were looked down on.” Oona says Grandma Jenny would be thrilled to know that she was being talked about in a Jewish journal.

Auntie Miri became a doctor and in a secret registry office wedding she married a penniless playwright (Tom Stoppard!). Then Hazel took a similar route with an African-American academic and their mother Jenny turned both their photographs to face the wall. She did not speak to Miriam for two years. Oona reflects that her Grandma must have been very open-minded to have learnt Hebrew and convert to

Judaism when prevailing attitudes towards Jews in Newcastle were extremely xenophobic but that open-mindedness did not extend to her daughters marrying ‘out’.

Nevertheless, Oona’s Jewish grandparents became a significant influence. “We grew up in North London and would see them at least every other weekend on Friday nights, and holidays. This was where my brother Slater and I got our Jewishness because my Mum had rebelled and decided she wasn’t that keen on religion. Mum and Grandad, who was a bit of a militant Zionist, argued about Israel all the time. As a child I was given a certificate for my tree in Israel ... I really want to see my tree in Israel one day!”

Oona says her mother told few positive stories about being Jewish,

having been bullied by gentile children for being Jewish and rejected by her Jewish peers, but she did make her daughter think about being Jewish.

“My mother always impressed the horrors of the Holocaust on me. I remember being dragged round museums, understanding how many people died. And the fact was always there that I would have had ‘double points’, being obviously black and less obviously Jewish.”

She reads widely about the Holocaust and has visited Yad Vashem. The Auschwitz Education Trust invited Oona to visit the camps, which will happen within the next two years but she guards against becoming a ‘disaster’ tourist. As a member of the Select Committee for International Development, walking around Pol Pot’s torture chambers, visiting the American War Crimes Museum in Vietnam and the African Slave Museum in the Congo, Oona felt she had done enough on torture in her life. Then she adds, “I could not live a happy life, unless I also felt able to look at the worst things humanity can throw up, including the Holocaust. You’ve never done enough on human suffering and prejudice!” Oona King’s proudest achievement is setting up the All-Party Group on Genocide Prevention after a visit to Rwanda.

Oona attended Haverstock School where her mother had previously been a teacher and known to be Jewish. Oona King remembers being called Yid-Nigger in the playground, but that was rare. For the first 30 years of her life, any prejudice was always directed towards her being a black woman. She has since been through some very tough times, including death threats from the ‘White Wolves’, who demanded Jews and Blacks should leave Britain by the Millennium.

Oona says her resilience comes from her ancestors, born into slavery, fleeing pogroms and surviving the Irish potato famine. “I think there is something in visualisation which takes you out of your own time and place. I imagined being them and they became real people to me, which they weren’t before. Then I realised the death threats were a totally irrelevant distraction – but distractions can be very soul-destroying at the time.”

And what does Oona think about the state of racism in the UK now? She believes racism has decreased in some respects – a typical 1950s citizen would

not have thought of her as being quintessentially British – but in many smaller places, people continue to fear the stranger. The change is that now it is harder to be ‘out’ as a racist.

She believes that racism has twin catalysts of ignorance and insecurity. Communities blame the ‘other’ for their misfortunes. Recently, when canvassing in Barking, King was told by Africans that there are too many Poles in the country. “We would be mistaken to make the comfortable assumption that we can’t regress as well as progress, especially in a worsening economic climate. I do not take it for granted that we will inevitably become less racist.”

She believes that Jews and Muslims need to acknowledge that when racism gets worse for one community it also gets worse for the other. “The terrible thing is that the more the Muslim community feel discriminated against, the more it brings out their tendency to do the same. Racism doesn’t inoculate you, as you would imagine. Often the opposite is true.”

I ask about her maiden speech, made on July 5, 1997, in which she declared that her background could ‘be a bridge between two cultures’ and suggest she bridges many more. Oona laughs. When she described herself as mixed-race during the process of adopting her son Elia, her social worker rejoined that she was not abreast of current thinking which prefers ‘dual heritage’. “This is an inherently limiting term,” Oona observes, “because it means you can only have two heritages!”

I mention that elsewhere in this edition of *JR*, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks discusses his position on the multicultural debate. Oona, who chairs the Institute for Community Cohesion, says his contribution has been outstanding and having previously never picked up a book by a theologian, she was enchanted and entranced by *The Dignity of Difference*. She thinks Rabbi Sacks is correct in saying multiculturalism had its place at a certain time, but disagrees that multiculturalism leads to intolerance.

“Multiculturalism has its limitations – the issue is whether communities are living with each other, or beside each other. You can have a sterile multiculturalism which is just ghettoised, or a vibrant multiculturalism where communities interact and do not just live parallel lives. The backlash

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against multiculturalism is about a sense that it inadvertently funded separatism. It didn’t go out of its way to encourage genuine integration, which is what current government policy now attempts to do. Any policy can have unintended consequences.”

Oona believes we have to calibrate multiculturalism to ensure it carries on working for us. She concludes London

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won the Olympics over Paris, because it was seen to be a successful multicultural city where every country in the world is represented.

“Whether you are talking about the economic environment or the gene pool, different cultures give strength and diversity. Even intellectually, it tests your arguments against other world views, and I think that is a healthy thing. So I agree overall with the Chief Rabbi’s argument which is that we need to learn how to live together more effectively.”

So is multicultural Bethnal Green a good place for Oona’s two-year-old Elia to grow up. She laughs happily and says Bethnal Green is a fantastic place. Oona loves the East End, which she came to at the age of 25 when looking for material for her wedding dress. She continues to feel astonished, almost as if she has emigrated within London.

“It has a combustible atmosphere and so much history. East London was where the ideas for the welfare state were tried out, where the first council flats were built and Victoria Park was the first public park. But the main history of course is the people – from

the Huguenots to the Jews to the Bengalis and again now, Eastern Europeans. And the best thing is that nobody knows it can also be very beautiful, and between Mile End and Bethnal Green you have swans and deer in the park. I think my son will be very happy here.”

I ask whether being Jewish contributed to the loss of her Parliamentary seat? Oona King replies that it was certainly a factor in a constituency with a large Muslim population, but a lesser factor than having voted for the war in Iraq. A raft of antisemitic allegations without doubt contributed to her loss by 800 votes, including the rumour that she wanted to ban halal meat.

Constantly having people shouting abuse at her for being Jewish made her more protective towards her Jewish background. “If you feel under threat then you pull your identity closer to you. Being Jewish links me to my grandparents, who I was very close to as a child. It’s also simply who I am. I couldn’t imagine just being black. The thing about me is that I am black and Jewish. It means I am different to other black people and it means I am different to other Jewish people. It doesn’t mean that my experience of Judaism has

anything to do with the average Jewish experience. But it does mean that I draw on some of the same stories and a lot of the same identity.”

I ask about the ‘coolness’ of being black and wonder whether King finds there is any ‘coolness’ about being Jewish? There is much laughter as she replies, “No, I haven’t found that to be the case so far. The Jewish community is seen to be quite wealthy, compared to other migrant communities. Wealth usually bars you from being ‘cool’. The legendary ability of the Jewish community to flourish means it is just not like being Scottish, Asian, Irish.” Then Oona talks about the Hampstead Jews she grew up with and I identify Anglo-Jewry’s many continuing pockets of poverty.

In her diaries King wrote about buying her hamsa in Fez and looking forward one day to reclaiming her Jewish heritage. I ask how she is doing with that. Oona replies that she has been reading quite a lot of basic texts and she takes a greater interest now than ever before.

And what would Oona still like to accomplish? Possibly to write a novel, but she says that at her usual rate of output this wouldn’t be ready until her centenary. In about ten years time Oona King might fancy being Mayor of



Oona King with husband Tiberio and their son Elia

London. She already has an exciting and demanding full-time job at Number 10 but she wants to keep the promise she has made to herself and be there for Elia whilst he is still young.

As I prepare to leave she says, “I have always been struck by the generosity of the Jewish community when they write to me, even when they are outraged over my views on Israel.” Then she takes her copy of Aharon Applefeld’s *The Story of a Life*, which I mentioned I had not read, and presents it to me.

*The Oona King Diaries: House Music* is published by Bloomsbury at £12.99

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