

Sylvia Clare

BY JUDITH KOTILA (SYLVIA'S DAUGHTER)©

My mother, Sylvia Kotila, was born Sylvia Lena Clare in London, England, in 1916 to parents who had immigrated there as children. She lived in the borough of East Hackney with them and her younger sister, Judy. Her father worked as a jewellery designer in a company owned by his uncle, and her mother was a self-employed professionally trained tailor. In high school she specialized in secretarial studies and learned typing and shorthand. She played tennis, field hockey and loved to swim—sports she continued into adulthood.



**National Fire Service Officer
Sylvia Clare**

moved up to the rank of Leading Firewoman and served until July 1945.

Meanwhile my father, Lauri Kotila, was living in Timmins, Ontario. He had volunteered to join the Canadian army and trained in Petawawa, Ontario. At the age of 2 he had emigrated to Canada from Finland with his parents and while in the army was given temporary Canadian citizenship. He served in Europe with the Royal Canadian Engineers, working on radios and communications. Years later he could still remember Morse code! After being wounded in Holland, he was stationed in London. While there, one of his duties was to read radio broadcasts in Finnish for the BBC.

Life during the war was difficult. It was dangerous because of the almost nightly bombing and there was a bomb shelter in my mother's parents' back yard. Food was rationed, as was material and clothing. But there were also good times. Dances were held for servicemen to boost morale and my parents met at a dance at the Astoria Hotel.



**Sylvia (front row, second from left)
with her field hockey team**

Source: all photos, author



**Sylvia Clare and Lauri Kotila
on their wedding day**

Their first date was at the cinema and my mother didn't let him hold her hand! Their romance blossomed, however, and they married in 1945 in a civil ceremony at the Hackney Town Hall attended by family and friends.

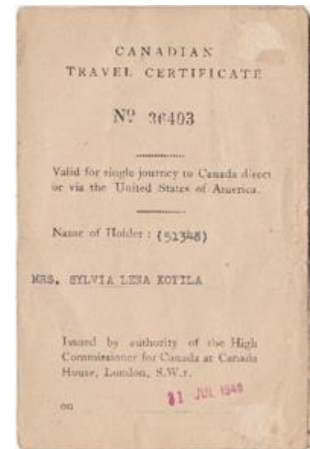


Son Alan with his grandparents

RMS *Queen Mary* with other war brides. It was a rough crossing and many sailors were sick, but my mother was fine! They landed in Halifax and then took the train to Ontario.

At war's end, the army brought my father back to Canada, and he returned to Timmins, where he had been working before the war as a gold miner. He got that job again and rented an apartment heated by a wood stove in Schumacher, a small town on the outskirts of Timmins. The army gave every returning soldier some money with which they could buy a fridge and stove.

My mother, meanwhile, was still living with her parents in London, and she gave birth to my oldest brother, Alan, there. When he was four months old, they sailed to Canada on



Sylvia's travel certificate



Sylvia and Alan Kotila, Timmins, winter 1946

My mother enjoyed being in Timmins and the cold weather didn't bother her. She was happy to be away from the destruction of war, and there was less food rationing in Canada than in England. She also appreciated being away from the British class system and found the Canadian social structure more easy-going. Her English accent gave her some status and as a British subject she had the right to vote in elections.

Meanwhile, my father didn't have the right to vote, because when he was discharged from the army in 1946 his Canadian citizenship was revoked. He was offended and waited another 13 years to apply for citizenship.

For social activities in Timmins in the 1940s my parents attended weekly dances at the Macintyre Arena and got together with other couples to play cards. They also visited my father's sister and father, who were living in Timmins.

Two additional children were born in Timmins in the 1950s. The family moved to Elliot Lake, Ontario, in 1958 and then to Sudbury, Ontario, in 1959. My parents remained there for the rest of their lives. My father passed away in 1990, my mother in 2005 at the age of 88.