

the northern line

the magazine of north london U3A issue 84 January 2024

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- The Northern Line, published three times a year, is edited by Leni Green and designed by Barry Davies.
- Please send contributions for the next issue to editor@nlu3a.org.uk by 15 March.
- **The editors may shorten or otherwise amend articles to fit spacing and style requirements.**

Editorial

Why did you join NLU3A? After I retired in 2009, I didn't know what to do. A friend pointed me to NLU3A, and I saw in the interest group booklet (remember those?) that it had a chamber orchestra aimed at people who hadn't played their instruments for a long time or were bravely learning new ones.

I'd played the violin as a child but gave it up at age 12 (it wasn't 'cool'), though I'd been told that I was 'good'. I wanted to get back to it – I'd made few thwarted attempts, and thought I'd try again.

So I trundled along, violin case in hand, and attempted to play. I was awful! Couldn't keep time; wasn't sure where to put my fingers; was halfway through the piece when everyone else was finished. I'm sure it annoyed

the other members, but nobody ever said anything – at least not to my face! Eventually I got a teacher and, while I'll never equal Nicola Benedetti, I can hold my own in the group.

Gradually I joined other groups and answered a call to work on this magazine (then a black-and-white newsletter), which gave me a chance to use and augment my professional skills.

I've made friends, gained confidence and consider NLU3A one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I hope it's done as much for you, and I hope we'll keep it going.

In this issue we see how NLU3A's games groups are challenging our minds. Miriam David tells the story of her Women and Wisdom group.



And Francis Beckett experiences the frustrations of chatbots.

Happy reading!

LENI GREEN

EDITOR

editor@nlu3a.org.uk



Front cover

In the article on page 9, Jo Velleman selected two of her preferred works of art: *A Boyar Wedding Feast* by Makovsky, pictured on page 10, and our front cover image, *Hahn/Cock*, by Katharina Fritsch, which appeared in 2013 on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. Photo by Barry Davies.

Back cover

The photo, from Rennett Stowe/Flickr.com, CC by 2.0 tries to create a mood which could be experienced in one of the games described in this edition. See page 5 for details of our chess club.



As I see it

Don't be a learning snob, says **Patricia Isaacs**. There are a multitude of ways to use our brains

Learning is not only for intellectuals; we all have a brain, skills, abilities. There are very many ways to gain new experiences; everyone can do it, and learning with U3A is, of course, why our members join. Generally, when we think about using our brain we think about academic subjects, but there are other ways to gain knowledge, and if some of these are considered to be social skills, what is wrong with that? Why is the study of art respected, but less so the artistic ability to knit, stitch, embroider in amazingly diverse and striking ways?

Let us not forget the social aspect. Few of us are hermits, and getting together is a vital part of any society; walking, cycling, away days and so on are excellent ways of enjoying a day

out and being with like-minded people. If taking part in non-academic social activities leads to other uses of the brain, that can only be a really good thing.

Let's take a look at some of the activities mentioned in this issue of The Northern Line: board games for example. Knowledge and understanding are required in chess, crosswords, bridge, and all of these stimulate the brain. Also, when our members take part in games sessions, they may well be encouraged to join other groups, to discover interests they have never before considered.

Being part of a U3A group does not involve taking exams, being graded, or having any prior experience. Taking part is for enjoyment, for acquiring

Learning is not only for intellectuals; we all have a brain, skills, abilities



new interests and knowledge, for meeting people, making new friends; and taking part is for the pleasure of learning, no strings attached. With a whole alphabet of groups to join, the world opens out in new and wonderful ways.

PATRICIA ISAACS IS A PAST
CHAIR OF NLU3A

The games people play

Games may be fun, but are they worthwhile? 'Yes!' say those who play them. They make us think, challenge our memories, teach us new skills – and encourage social interaction: every NLU3A games group has a social side, with refreshments and sometimes outings. On the next pages the coordinators of our card and board games and crossword groups explain.



Playing your cards right

Bridge

Bridge is a card game of strategic communication, derived from whist. In essence, two players ('partners') concentrate on how to defeat the other two by superior assessment of the strength of their respective cards. The aim is to win more 'tricks' (a set of four cards, usually won by the person who played the highest card) than their opponents.

'Bridge encourages a few of the skills that many of us feel are slipping away from us as we move on in life,' says Robin Vicary from the Intermediate Plus group. 'Memory, strategic thinking and probabilities are a few such skills, and a weekly bridge session provides help with these.

'We discuss each game

afterwards, so that we can all ponder on what we should have bid or played! One of the more experienced players leads a teaching programme, and members are encouraged to bring up problems and raise topics for future teaching sessions', he says.

This group requires a certain level of ability at bridge. Novices can join the Beginners' and Improvers' group, facilitated by Elsa Shamash, where ideally there is an instructor at each table to guide, answer questions



and conduct a post mortem after every game. However, currently this is not the case, so Elsa is hoping that someone will volunteer to help with this multi-level group of 20 players.

There are currently four bridge groups:

- **Beginners and Improvers:** Wednesdays 10.30am to 12.30pm at the Highgate Society, N6. Coordinators: Jim Sweeney (020 8340 9282) and Elsa Shamash (elsa.shamash@gmail.com)
- **Improvers 1:** Thursdays at Fordington Road, N6 4TD. Coordinator: Mary Stacy (020 8883 3131, marystacy@earlblue.com)
- **Improvers Plus:** Fridays online, 10am to 12 noon on bridgebase.com, supplemented by Whatsapp or Zoom for audio. Coordinator: Jim Sweeney (020 8340 9282)
- **Intermediate Plus:** Mondays 10am to 12 noon, St. Margaret's Church, Victoria Avenue, N3 1BD. Jenny Pizer (jfpizer@googlemail.com) and Sheila Stacey (sheila@drylands.com) are the coordinators.

Photo: Mary Michaelides



Bolivia canasta

Bolivia is a strategic card game for four people playing in partnership. Players meld (mix) sets of sequences in the same suit to earn points. To do this, they

lay down cards, which both members of the team can build on. The aim is to collect as many points as possible in each round to achieve a final score of at least 15,000 and not to have

any cards left in your hand.

To achieve this, you need to collect at least two 'canastas', one of which must be a SAMBA canasta (seven cards of the same suit and in sequence; see picture

on page 4.)

Come and observe and if you like it, join us! Experienced group members will offer advice, and you'll get a free copy of the rules.

The group meets on Monday

afternoons from 2–5.30 pm at the Elephant Inn, Ballards Lane, North Finchley.

COORDINATOR:

MARY MICHAELIDES

MARYMICHAEL46@GMAIL.COM

On the boards

Chess Club

We begin with light physical exercise, as we set out tables and chairs, chess boards and chessmen. I then try to pair up each player with someone of similar playing strength, after which we embark on two hours of intellectual battle, usually in an amiable silence.



Our members are simply people who love to play chess and who know the rules of the game. About a third are novices, another third are hobby players, and the remaining third are players of club or county strength. The club is for fun, but we have a serious side too. We are registered as a chess club with the English

Chess Federation, and we use tournament-standard equipment. We even use chess clocks on occasion, mainly to ensure that games end on time.

Chess Club is not intended for complete beginners, but if one were to join, they would be very

welcome and I would be happy to teach them the rules. I wish I could say that we are a mixed group of men and women, but alas our current members are all male. I hope this article sparks interest among some women reading it; they would be especially welcome to join us.

- Chess Club meets on the second and fourth Wednesday of the month, 3pm to 5pm, at the Blue Beetle, 26 Hendon Lane, Finchley N3 1RT.

COORDINATOR:

DAVID LEWIS

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Mah-jong

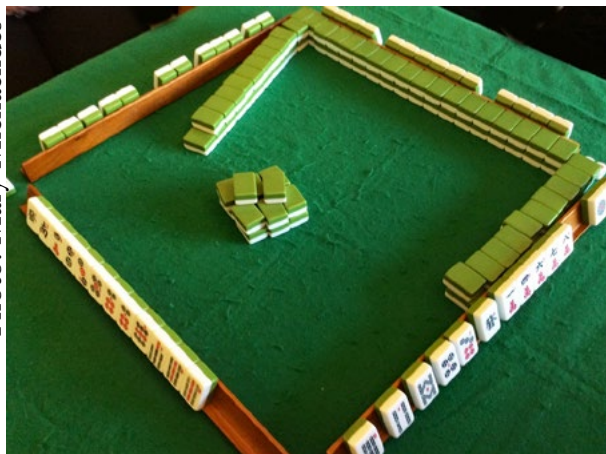
Mah-jong is a table game for four people. It is played with a set of 144 tiles based on Chinese characters and symbols. The tiles are put out upside down on the table and shuffled. Each player builds a wall with a double row of 18 tiles – 36 in total. The walls are pushed close together to form a square symbolising the Great Wall of China.

The game requires each player to collect four sets of three identical tiles and a pair. This is achieved by picking a tile from the wall or from a discard then throwing out one tile every turn. The winner is first player laying

out a complete hand and calling out 'Mah-jong!'

The Mah-jong group meets every other Monday afternoon between 2pm and 4pm. We play in my dining-room in Muswell Hill where I can fit two card tables. There is a good mix of people, both very experienced and beginners. The more experienced ones take the newcomers under their wing. We are relaxed and we laugh a lot. Unfortunately the size of the room does not allow for a third

Photo: Mary Michaelides



table, so at present we are unable to invite more players to join us.

COORDINATOR:

ANNIE MORLEY-SLINN

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Games group

Currently we play Triominos, Quirkle and Rummikub. Once we get tired of these, we will decide what to play next!

Anyone who has played Dominos can easily play **Triominos**. It's a similar game but with numbers on three sides instead of two.

Quirkle is easy enough to play – even for children – but for

adults it requires a lot of strategy. Players take turns laying tiles down on the table with the aim of making lines of colours or shapes to earn the most points, while trying to block their opponents.

Two to six people can play **Rummikub**. Each player starts with 14 tiles, and the aim is to be the first to play all the tiles from your rack by forming them into sets. The most exciting part

of the game is manipulation – rearranging or adding to sets already on the table.

Want to know more? Come and join us on alternate Wednesdays at the Elephant Inn, Ballards Lane, North Finchley, from 2.00pm until late!

COORDINATOR: MARY MICHAELIDES, 07914 081 662, MARYMICHAEL46@GMAIL.COM



Photos: Mary Michaelides

Scrabble

Scrabble improves your general word power; you discover words that you've never heard of and find strategies for using them on the board. It's a sociable game but it has a competitive edge.

The aim is to make words from the seven tiles each player picks – eyes closed – from a bag. The words – which must be in an agreed dictionary – build upon each other like a crossword. Some of the board squares increase the number of points players can get if they incorporate them in a word, adding a strategy element.

When we have finished playing, I often do an analysis of the board to look for similar themes in the words created. I see

Scrabble as resonating with life, where you have to make the best of what you've got. There's a strong element of luck as well, with the letters you pick at random from the bag, but the top players can work magic with any letters.

We meet in my home in West Finchley on the second Monday of every month from 3pm. If you like working with words, why not join us?

COORDINATOR: LIS VANDYK, 020 8349 4705, LIS.VANDYK@SKY.COM

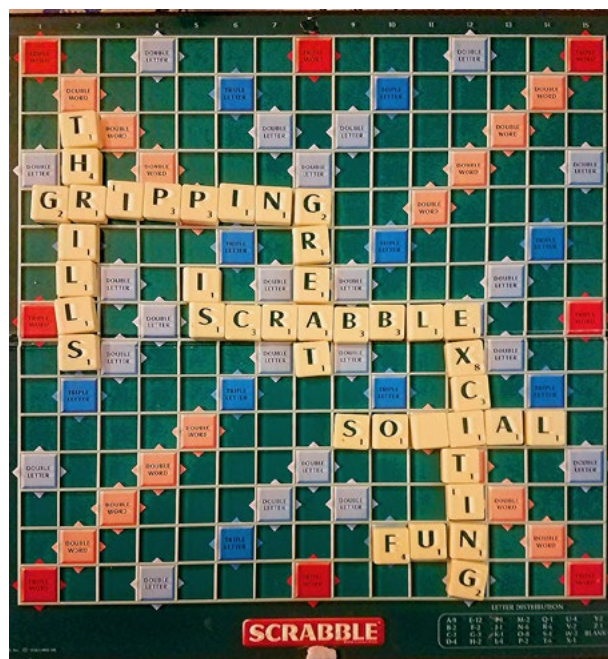


Photo: Lis Vandyk

Cryptic crosswords

There are two cryptic crossword groups, uncryptically called 1 and 2

Group 1 is not a teaching group, so some knowledge of how to crack the clues is essential. We always do a puzzle together. Having spent about 20 minutes trying to get started on our own, we come together to pool our resources.

We usually manage to finish the puzzle together, although often we can't see the reason for the answer. We always learn a new word or two – even at our advanced age!

Who knew what *milliard* (one thousand million; one billion) meant? Well, one of us did. Or *isagoge* (academic introduction to a specialised subject, from the Greek.) None of us did! There is always a bonus – the opportunity to take a puzzle to do at home, on our own.

We meet at my home in Finchley on the first Wednesday

of each month from 2.30 to 4pm.
COORDINATOR: SUE GOLD
SUEGOLD376@GOOGLEMAIL.COM

Group 2 originated because Group 1 was full. We meet once a month in members' homes and do a puzzle together and then take one away for homework and go through it at the next meeting. We get a lot of pleasure and fun out of trying together, and we always manage to finish each puzzle.

We decided against Zoom

meetings in the Covid era, but we managed to continue throughout by meeting in members' gardens when we were allowed to do so. I'm glad I joined this group: it has given me a lot of pleasure and I've enjoyed every meeting.

We meet in members' homes in Finchley on the last Wednesday of the month, 2 to 4pm.

COORDINATOR:
MAUREEN POTTER
MMPOTTER35@GMAIL.COM

Some favourite clues

- Gentle about a false person, one with nine noughts (8 letters) = milliard (gentle [mild], false person [liar])
- Raised voice in row on river (8 letters) = falsetto (fal [river in Cornwall] + set to)
- Unusually large skate in these expanses of water (5,5) = Great Lakes (anagram of large skate)

A tale of Women and Wisdom

Miriam David, professor emerita and a feminist academic activist on gender, women and education, retired from the then University of London Institute of Education in 2009. She tells how she offered her services to NLU3A in what became the flourishing Women and Wisdom group. Photos by Miriam David.

Women's Learning Lives started in January 2010, in the basement of Lauderdale House in Highgate, with one or two participants, which gradually increased to 12 in the summer term. These included Jenny Clark, who had just relinquished the post of chair of NLU3A, and our respected and resplendent elder, Josephine



Zara. We decided that we would write about our educational journeys in pairs from the same generation. It happened that two members of our group had grown up very near to my hometown of Keighley: they hailed from Bradford, which is where I migrated as a teenager. Another woman had been teaching Latin

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in nearby Leeds.

The West Riding of Yorkshire featured strongly in our early educational lives. We talked about the education system of Sir Alec Clegg, who had been West Riding's innovative chief education officer, and the obstacles to women's access to universities. We moved on to the Brontës and their wonderful novels, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Of course, there were some outliers – for example, one who had grown up in north London but gone on to live and work in Italy and Africa. Others talked about the schools they had gone to: one had attended a 'free school' in north London and subsequently travelled to the Sorbonne in Paris. Yet others talked about the lack of university opportunities and limited jobs for women, except for secretarial work or school-teaching. Others had enjoyed further education classes, where they had met likeminded women.

After about five terms of discussing how our learning lived

on in our lives as older women, we decided to change our name to reflect what we offered. We alighted on Women and Wisdom. At the same time, we moved our venue to my house in Tufnell Park, alternating with another member's home in Hampstead Garden Suburb. But by then, our group had grown to about 16–18 regulars, so we

had to move again – this time to Trees, a care home in Highgate, where we stayed for about two years and whose lovely gardens invigorated our discussions. And where, occasionally, some of the female residents joined us. We had fun discussing personal and political matters, including questions about witches and violence against women and girls,

and our personal dilemmas of ageing and tips to cope. We then moved to the Clissold Arms a rather eccentric pub in Muswell Hill, where we stayed for a few years, until the publican died and the pub changed hands.

Finally, after a major search, we found our present lovely woodland haven – the Finchley Victoria Bowling Club. We have celebrated birthdays such as

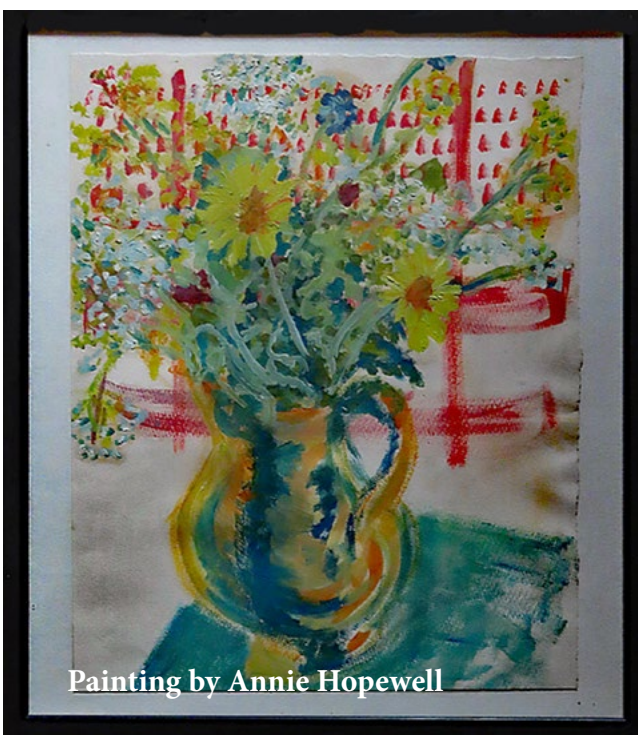


Jenny, Annie, Diana, Patricia, Josephine.
photo taken in 2013

the 95th of our late 'matriarch', Josephine Zara, who was full of vigour and vitality. We mourned her loss two years later. More recently, we lost the artist Annie Hopewell, whose paintings and sculptures we treasure.

As a group of wise women, we survived the pandemic by meeting weekly on Zoom. It provided the necessary care and support. Since the pandemic we have come together all the wiser and stronger to face a tragically changing world with fun, laughter and literature – and of course political questions. We argue, inevitably, about male power and violence against women. We discuss human rights but avoid including trans rights. We learn from each other's passions and presentations, such as the 50th anniversary of Virago feminist press that only publishes books by women. Most recently, our brilliant embroiderer made us a new banner for Women and Wisdom to take us into the future, given the changing political times.

MIRIAM E. DAVID,
MIRIAM.DAVID@UCL.AC.UK



Painting by Annie Hopewell

It's an annual thing

The AGM took place in September, after a talk on the musical *Showboat* ending with a bit of a sing-along to Paul Robeson's 'Old Man River'. There was good attendance, with 75 members in the room plus 11 people who had cast proxy votes.

A vote confirmed that membership subscriptions will remain at £40 per year for 2024, which, said the treasurer, should allow us to balance the books in 18 months' time and is in line with other U3As in north London.

After discussion, a motion to change the start of the

membership year from January to September (as the start of the academic year) was defeated. Members who join halfway through the year or later are charged less.

There was also a motion to amend the constitution to allow the creation of honorary members – who enjoy lifetime free membership – to pay homage to individuals who have given extraordinary service to NLU3A. This was eventually withdrawn: the chair said that rule 31 of NLU3A's constitution already allows for names to be put forward

for honorary membership, so there is no need for the change, which would require permission from the Third Age Trust and the Charity Commission. There are currently four honorary members: Mike Christie, Patricia Isaacs, Keith Richards and Ruth Silver.

The only AOB items were a heartfelt plea for more volunteers for the catering team (please do let events coordinator Marion Fitzpatrick know if you can help), and generous thanks from one member to the committee for steering NLU3A through another year.

All the committee members were re-elected, on a single vote, as follows:

Chair – Michael Johns

Vice-chair – Edmond Cohen

Treasurer – Roy Seger

Business and membership secretary – Ruth Silver

Groups organiser – Henrietta Cohen

Events organiser – Marion Fitzpatrick

Publicity – Michael Lewin

Web editor – Susan Watt

Culture correspondent

During the pandemic, when cinemas and theatres were closed, Jo Velleman came to the rescue with a weekly emailed culture fix of entertainment that we could access online. After a hiatus, she took this up again and now sends her emails well beyond NLU3A and, indeed, the UK. **Hilary Segall** interviewed her to discover what makes her tick

How long have you been a member of North London U3A?

I joined in May 2019 and enrolled in several groups but am currently only attending two: Art We Like and Shape of London. However I used to attend Life, Art and Politics, which I gave up when it changed days and then clashed with my Russian group (not U3A); I also took part in Armchair Critics, which then clashed with my Lockdown University history group, and during Covid I gave up A Sideways Look at History, which

gave way to other groups!

What do you enjoy about Art We Like? Have you given many presentations and do you have any favourites?

I really love Art We Like, led by the very knowledgeable Angela Cox. We have explored so many paintings from across the centuries. I personally have presented 12 paintings, including *An Old Woman: The Ugly Duchess* by Quinten Massys, *El Jaleo* by John Singer Sargent, *A Boyar Wedding Feast* by Konstantin

Makovsky and *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* by Lucian Freud.

I am not sure if I have any favourites – part of the appeal of Art We Like is that everything is unique; it is the choosing of the subject and researching it for the group that is so much fun – you learn so much along the way.

Shape of London is very different. I have given ten presentations to this group including... Cast in Stone or Bronze: Royal Statues in London, The Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar

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Square and The Mediaeval Mansion that moved, Moran Hall, from Bishopsgate to Chelsea (How Sir Thomas More's Crosby Hall became Moran Hall).

You also joined the NLU3A Shakespeare Reading Group – are you no longer part of that?

No! I was running out of days and steam! I also do a Friday afternoon online opera group (not U3A) and the Arts Society, which sometimes clashes with Art We Like – a conflict of interests! And I produce a weekly Cultural Catch-up newsletter, mainly theatre and opera, as well as running my 91-year-old mum to various appointments and errands – and we mustn't forget the usual

Two of Jo's preferred works of art: A Boyar Wedding Feast and Hahn/Cock, pictured on the front cover.



A Boyar Wedding Feast by Konstantin Makovsky 1884 in Hillwood Estate Museum Washington, DC, US.

household chores!

I am exhausted just reading through what you do in one week! You know the old adage: if you want a job done ask a

busy person. Many thanks for your time and patience – I'll let you get back to whichever activity I have taken you away from!

Your call is important to us...

...or not, as **Francis Beckett** found out

Virgin Media (may its executives die screaming after I waited for three hours on the telephone to speak to the man with the key to the thumbscrews) has a 'chatline' which disgruntled customers can access.

I accessed it. I kept telling the wretched robot that I wanted to speak to a human being, but it went through its menu at a leisurely pace, all the time using phrases that are supposed to put you at ease. 'Let's get you sorted, then' it wrote at one point, like a kindly uncle, and if it had had a human face, I would have hit it.

At last it agreed that I might correspond with a human instead. I'd have to wait a bit, but apparently, this was for my benefit: 'That way you can get on with your day,' said the robot. So after the first hour, I lifted my eyes from the screen for a minute

or so, and when I looked back, my moment had gone. Sorry we missed you, the robot said cheerfully.

Of course Virgin Media aren't the only big company that does that (though they are one of the worst.) Every reader of The Northern Line can tell stories of hanging on for hours, on helplines and chatlines, to banks, insurance companies, departments of local authorities. You can't 'get on with your day' – you must stay glued to the screen or the phone, lest your precious moment comes and is gone.

We tell ourselves that it's all new technology and therefore inevitable. But it isn't. The technology in itself has the capacity to make all our lives better, not worse.

In the early 1980s, Len Murray, then general secretary of the Trade Unions Congress,

greeted the digital age with enthusiasm. It could, he said, give us 'a shorter working day, a shorter working week, a shorter working life.'

And so it could have done. Instead, it's produced exactly the opposite, as well as making our lives poorer and more stressful.

New technology fell into the hands of the big corporations. And they used it to ensure that the people they used to employ to help us are now swelling the ranks of the unemployed.

They did it because they have a towering contempt for us. Our time matters not at all. If we spend our lives stressed, glued to the screen or the phone, that's good for their bottom line.



Those we have lost

We remember and pay tribute to those of our friends who died in 2023. We are sorry if we missed anyone; this is the information we have.

Jonathan Boswell

Alan Burns

James Crawford

Linda Day

Rosalind Furtado

Jutta Lawrence

Shirley Meredeen

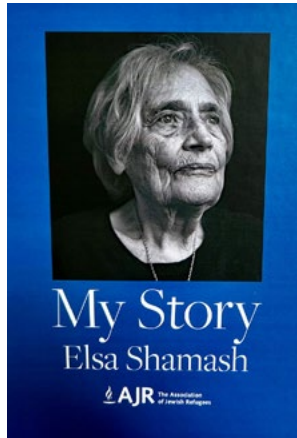
Patricia Pearce

Peter Rockwell

Sue Teller

Jeanette Thornhill

Gwenan Williams



Elsa Shamash, who came to the UK on the Kindertransport, tells her story in this book, available to download free from Elsa Shamash (ajrmystory.org.uk).

Spring term monthly meetings

These take place at St Margaret's United Reformed Church, Victoria Avenue, N3 1BD, usually on the second Monday of the month. Doors open at 10am, when refreshments are served. Meetings start at 10.45.

- The spring term runs from 8 January to 28 March. Significant holidays are Good Friday: 29 March; Easter: 1 April; Passover: 22 to 30 April.

8 January: Would you like to write your life story?

Jo Livingston will provide practical advice on this: what to include, where to find information, and how to produce your book when it's written. Jo is the U3A's national subject adviser for living history, and editor of the U3A's book of members' experiences during Covid, *u3a in the Time of Corona*.



12 February: Alien life – what are the chances?

Peter Altman, a retired biochemist, will discuss all things alien, from UFOs and alien encounters to recent research and the scientific likelihood of alien life. The talk is based on his 2020 book, *Mysteries of the Universe*.



11 March and 15 April: to be confirmed

