

CHAPTER THREE

EARLY YEARS

Our barber shop fronted Oakley street. It was not such a good class shop as those of the other Zbarzhes, which I found humiliating. We had no real shop window (vitrine), just the glass through which one looked into ~~the shop~~ the shop. True, we were not as low as the Fletcher's, the other barber shop in Oakley street. Fletcher charged tuppence a shave, fourpence a haircut; we charged threepence and sixpence. One has to have someone to look down on. The Zbarzhes charged fourpence and eightpence.

There were two "chairs", sc. barber's chairs. I remember the ratchet back rests, the "ratchety ratchet" (best I can do) they made when you pulled them up or down so as to get the customer's face in the right position.

Although there was a Jewish school, and a US synagogue, the Borough, about a mile away, there were no local Jewish children. I had no Jewish friends until I went to Battersea County school, when I was eleven. So, when I wasn't reading, or pretending to "practise" (the violin), I had fights with the shkootsim. My particular bête noire was one Tommy Blackhurst. His mother came round to the house once prepared to "make shvarts shubbes (= "create a scene"). She wanted to know what I had done to "her Tommy". Whereupon boobbe produced me and said: "Your Tommy, what about my boy?" I must have borne visible marks of combat, because - as boobbe used to tell the story - Mrs B turned round and belted her Tommy (presumably for omitting to mention that ~~that~~ he had bashed me as much as, or more than, I had bashed him).

I never boxed, but I discovered a simple wrestling device. I would place my arm round my opponent's neck, my right leg behind his leg, and then pull him over my leg. I invariably succeeded in flooring my opponent, though I couldn't keep him in the approved spread-eagled position on the pavement or roadway (in Tanswell street; there were occasional

Cars, but they did not greatly affect our using the street as a playground and football pitch).

Incidentally, I was known as "Shonky", the ~~ze~~ lighter as "Mr Shonk". Until quite recently, I'd never found out the derivation of the word. I don't think there was anything malicious about the appellation. After all, "Witriol" would have been difficult for the yoikels ^(to pronounce) yoikels (don't confuse with yokels, for a long time I thought the two words connected. See my "Yids and Yokels" which the features editor of the JG said he "hoped to publish" - this was some two years ago - but which still hasn't been published). In any case, I can't imagine that my father's name featured on the shop fascia. Had I thought about it at the time I would have felt inferior to "Fletcher's" - no problems with a name like that. (Looking up Partridge's dictionary of historical slang I find - or rather found in December 1983, I'm typing this in December 1985, at this rate I'll finish the typescript of my complete autobiography, perhaps, if I survive to "the years of strength": "Shonky, n.; Shonk. A Jew: low: mid (C 19 -20). Hence shonky, adj. Mean, money grubbing.) The etymology remains a puzzle. See a short story featuring an encounter between Tommy Blackhurst and myself in The Young Zionist, 1932 (? - 33? 34?).

We were not poor, though ~~always~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ boobbe lived in constant dread of being forced to go to the "Guardians" (the Jewish Board of Guardians, now the Jewish Welfare Board). I don't remember ever having been hungry, and I'm pretty sure we ate better than the rest of the street. In those days chicken was a luxury, we had it every week, at least. Smoked salmon, too, was nothing exceptional. Today I tend to think of it as a bit of a luxury. Same applies to salt beef. "Marj" was as unknown to us as was butter to the yoikels. I always thought of this as the dividing line between Jew and Goy.

My mother had worries - to put it mildly - all the time about money, but they never affected me until after my father died; there was the psychological effect, hearing my mother's despairing cry day after day: "I don't know what we'll do if things get no better, we'll

have to go to the Guardians." But, as I say, she found the money to feed us to the standard of any of today's middle-class Jewish kids, without benefit of all the "ready prepared" stuff, and to see that we were respectably dressed.

Not that I cared about being respectably dressed. Boobbe always used to rub it in - mens sibi conscia rectitudinis - that she never let us go about mitn tookhess in drohssen, "with the podex outside," sc. with a shirt hanging out of worn trousers. I regarded it as more of a deprivation that I never had a tennis ball or a "Sorbo" (spongy high bouncer) of my own. I don't say everybody in the street had these desirable possessions, but a good many had. Or some had, anyway. Though when we played football in the street (one goalmouth at the "Cut", the other at the Oakley street end) the ball was not infrequently newspaper pressed together and tied with string. No bicycle of course, though I have very vague memories of "having a go" on a bike. Hired? Borrowed? But the goes weren't enough in number. If only I could have had my own bike, as my own kids have had, and my dad could have taught me to ride (as I "taught" my kids, simply by holding the bike while they made their first attempts at riding it), I might have become a proficient cyclist and a tragedy years later might have been avoided.

One game we played was called "Eye Jimmy Knacker" (surely a corruption of "High Gymkhana" ?). A boy stood with his back to the wall, four or five or however many in a team made a "back" each (as in leap frog) facing him, each boy holding ~~the~~ on to the boy in front, so as to make a continuous line of "backs". The other team had to run and jump on to the first and succeeding backs. If one of the "backs" collapsed I believe the other side had another go. If all the backs held while the "riders" shouted "Eye Jimmy Knacker Eye Eye Eye," the teams changed roles.

All good clean fun, but it must have been during the Tanswell

street era that I heard "Oom killed Christ?" With hindsight I realise I should have said, of course: "Wasn't me, it was the Joanna street boys." (Acknowledgments to Hugh Stubbs, grandson of the Bishop, with whom I joined up. He told me of a group of Manchester kids who, on being asked: "Oom killed Christ?" replied: "Wasn't us, it was the Leeds boys.") However, it worried me, because I went to the Jewish Free Reading Room in Whitechapel, where I discovered to my relief it was "the Romans." I'm pretty sure I walked to the Reading Room, either because I didn't have the money to ride (I don't think I had pocket money as such, not before I started going to Battersea County, anyway, and then it might have been the choice between a pennorth of Palm toffee and fourpence or sixpence on fares), and/or because I wouldn't ride on shubbes.

Most of the time, till I was twelve, the gottzeyligher was in hospital, or worse, for Mum, Sam and myself, at home on a sick-bed. I didn't know what the illness was. For a long time I thought it was cancer. The death certificate, signed by Dr Eban, stated "chronic nephritis". When he was at home, in a bed installed in the front room, he was constantly moaning or groaning, or worse, screaming. Why he had to suffer like that I don't know. It was terrible for boobbe to have to nurse him continuously, to see to the needs of the shop and look after us. There was always one man (barbering), at least, to feed, besides Sam and me, and I suppose about thirty handtowels a week to launder. I can never forget praying: "God, stop him screaming" at night. Eventually he did and he died. I suppose this must have played a considerable part in my agnosticism, more probably atheism - I wouldn't have known the word agnosticism while the zeyligher was alive

It was degrading. No screens, the gesheer, little incense cones to get rid of the smell. He suffered so much during his short life. He died at 48. It took me many years to forgive him for having died on me. "May his soul ^{be} bound up in the eternal bond of life." IF only one could believe.

CHAPTER FOUR

BANCROFT

The school nearest to us was a "rough" school, just round the corner, in Joanna street. I went to the "gently" school in Addington street, a walk of about fifteen minutes. Sam also went there, but he must have left in the term before I started (he was six years older than me). When he was eleven, and I five, he got an "intermediate" scholarship as I think it was called, to a "Central" school, West Square. (The "central" schools, for ages 11 - 16, were in the centre, between the elementary schools, 5 - 14, and the secondary schools, later to be known as "grammar", 11 - 18. At West Square they took the Oxford Senior Local examination, almost on a par with General Schools/matriculation.

Sam was the "gentle" one of the two of us. I was the ruffian. His life was a tragedy, he was a "social casualty", as Manny Saphier once put it. His trouble was he was too good a son and too good a brother.

He was, I believe, epileptic as a boy. I remember him fainting on occasion. Boobbe took a robust view of these incidents. "Ot khullesht er veeder, she would say - "He's gone and fainted again."

He was a good violinist. Unlike Franny Shlonkowitz, ~~£~~ (later aka Davison), he lacked confidence. But when he was sixteen, if not earlier, he was giving violin lessons. One of his pupils was the local publican, who once showed him round the cellars. I seem to remember Sam telling me that he - the publican - spat into the beer vats. Seems incredible, but the recollection, whether it rests on fact or not, persists. Sam was good too, at art. I remember his painting of a pack of playing cards - King, Queen, etc. - in perfect detail. OK, how bourgeois can you get. But I also remember seeing his pencil drawings when he was at Battersea County, and I'm pretty sure his Art Master was thinking of an Art scholarship for him. And, yes, he showed me Frith's "Derby Day" at

the National Gallery, drawing my attention to the wonderful detail, and he introduced me to the three Orders: Ionic, Doric and Corinthian. And sod cubism. There must have been a time when I could not have been all that fond of him. Boobbe used to say I was not fit to do up his bootlaces, which I think was a bit of an exaggeration - in later years we both "copped out" from her in equal measure. It's not, I think, that I was so bad as that he was too bloody good, as a son and brother, which had disastrous effects on his married life.

In those days there was the Junior County Scholarship, an examination in English and Arithmetic. If you passed, you could go free, and with a grant, to a fee-paying secondary school. If you didn't quite get the pass mark you went, as Sam did, to a Central school. There was no school coaching for the scholarship exam, as there was later for the "eleven plus". Sam was told the day before, that he was to sit the exam. When it came to my turn Sam coached me, months ahead. He initiated me into the mysteries of "x". There was always a problem involving x, or at least a problem which could be solved by using "x".

I sat for the scholarship on a Friday. An alternative paper was set for Jewish children who would not write on a Saturday, the normal day for the examination. I feel this is a tribute to the religious tolerance displayed by the country. After all, it must have been an administrative nuisance, setting separate papers. Boobbe saw me off on the day. The exam took place at a school in Kennington. In the school hall, where we sat doing our papers, a banner was strung up across the platform: "Play the Game", which I still feel, in spite of the mickey-taking to which it has been subjected, is sound moral instruction.

I knew I had done fairly well in the English paper. One of the subjects for composition was something like: "Your parents have gone for the day to Southend (or the seaside) leaving you in charge of your younger brother, aged four. Describe your experiences

This was right up my street. I described the infant tugging at my non-existent moustache, and the "beads of perspiration" trickling down my face. This kind of vocabulary was exceptional in an "elementary school" kid of eleven (it would have been perfectly normal, of course, in a middle class (middle middle, probably not lower middle) prep school kid.

So I was a ~~s~~scholarship boy. The school had a half-day holiday to celebrate the event. It's extremely unlikely I would have ~~got it passed~~ without Sam's coaching. He had no elder brother to coach him. Certainly I would not have got the Bancroft. Oi, Bancroft!

After the half-holiday I continued at Addington ~~Street~~. Then we got a letter saying I had been awarded a scholarship to Bancroft, as a boarder. Out of the scholarship winners about eight (it may have been sixteen; eight boys, eight girls) ~~were~~ awarded places at Christ's College Hospital (the "Bluecoat) school and Bancroft. The latter was, and is, a minor public school on the outskirts of London, technically in Essex. The letter stipulated that no concessions could be made as regards food, etc. for Jewish children. The gottzeyliger, I was told, had ~~said~~ said: "Loz ^{er} ~~cher~~ ^{offvuksen} ~~offvuksen~~ u yeet", Let him grow up to be a Jew. So Bancroft was out.

Life specialises in irony. Had the gottzeyliger been spared, he would have sheppt nukhess from the fact that whatever I was not, I was definitely "into" Yiddishkeyt. My two sons, who spent seven years at a Jewish school~~re~~ - well, Philip is very lukewarm, having been ice-cold for a long time, and Max has gone through every phase from being a complete goy, up till about ^{the age of} fifteen-sixteen, then ~~being~~ being a baal teshuvah at an appalling cost in mental illness, and now practising his "own shulchan aruch Judaism" (not riding on shubbes, but smoking; not going to shool, but still (December 1985) reading, I believe, books on mussar (Jewish ethics).

Jethro Bithell, my German tutor at Birkbeck, told me I had missed a lot by not going to Bancroft. And a chap on the teaching staff at the comprehensive school in Holloway where I taught for a few years agreed. He himself had been a pupil at Monoux, a grammar school in the same area as Bancroft, and where I had done four weeks' teaching practice. He said there was a lot of difference between the Monoux School, E 14, and Bancroft School, Essex.

I don't know. It's possible I would, indeed, have grown up to be a goy. I imagine there would have been very few other Jewish boys at Bancroft. The situation is not comparable with St Paul's, City of London, UCS and Haberdasher's Aske's, where there are large Jewish contingents and nearly all the Jewish pupils, I imagine, are day boys. At the secondary school which in the event was destined to number me among its pupils there was only the conflict between religious "assembly", from which I and about ten other Jewish pupils were allowed to, and did withdraw, and the home influence. At Bancroft there would have been the conflict between compulsory chapel and the home influence to which I would have been exposed in the holidays only.

The tensions would have been unbearable. There were tensions at Battersea County, where I spent five years and a term, but they were of a different kind. There was no question of having to conceal my religion, or racial or ethnic or whatever identity, or to keep it at a low profile. There were the other ~~Jewish kids~~ Jewish kids, who were seen to file into hall after the "act of religious worship" was over; we were known to be Jews, we knew we were known to be Jews, and that was it. There was a little anti-Semitism but - sorry to sound smug - it never affected me.

What is more, perhaps, to the point, is that I might have learnt German and/or Greek at Bancroft. I doubt whether the tuition would have been better, or that supervised "prep" would have helped me

more than the written homework, much of which I didn't do and which I didn't think and still don't think would have been of much use to me in examinations. And there is a strong possibility I would have ended up, not just as a "graduate seeks post", but as a "graduate, ex public school boy, seeks post."