

Sabbatical in England (1973)

My first sabbatical leave was in England at the Chester Beatty Cancer Research Institute, a section of the Royal Marsden Hospital, located in Sutton a suburb south of London. It was later called the London University Institute for Cancer Research. The year was 1973. I remember this year very distinctly since we were in England during the Yom Kippur war and also during the great English (Welsh) coal strike. The Chester Beatty was an institute famous for studies of leukemia. I had chosen to spend a year there because of the late Dr. Peter Alexander and his publications on macrophage activity and response to double stranded (ds) RNA. Macrophages are cells of the immune system that "eat" and clean up the body of foreign material and bacteria, and even destroy virus-infected cells. We worked in my laboratory with a virus that during its replication produced large amounts of double stranded RNA, although the virus itself contained single stranded RNA. The addition of double stranded RNA to macrophages led to what were called "angry macrophages". Microscopically the cells became very ruffled and appeared to move around the petri dish and destroy nearby cells. Adding ds-RNA to a mixture of macrophages and mouse L-cells, a cancerous cell line resulted in the L-cells being "gobbled up". This was at a time when in my own lab Barbara Cordell, a graduate student, discovered that the addition of viral dsRNA to a culture of cancer cells was toxic to the cells and killed them. At that time we had no idea of the mechanism of this activity. These results were published in 1971 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. Peter Alexander had published a number of papers in Nature on macrophage activation by double stranded RNA. We found or claimed that the dsRNA killing of cells happened without new protein synthesis, which was a surprise. I now think it was due to the binding of the dsRNA to what are now called toll like receptors on the cell surface, triggering a whole series of reactions leading to cell death including interferon production. The Alexander lab was also a top lab in the science of immunology and I had a Fogarty International Fellowship from the USPHS. The Alexander lab also did not understand the mechanism involved. Thus the aim of the Sabbatical was to investigate this mechanism, learn to culture macrophages, and measure interferon production.

We were allocated housing within a few blocks of the institute. This was a typical English semidetached house, we had one half and a Dutch couple also on sabbatical in the other half. We became quite friendly and we “ child” sat for each other giving us a lot of freedom to go into the city in the evenings. They had children slightly younger than ours. Yuval was 11 and Jonathan 8 at that time. We hooked up the houses by means of a walkie-talkie, which meant we could sit in our own house and listen for any noise from next door.

The house unfortunately was very dirty, the previous occupant having worked with sheep and there were sheep droppings (recognizable pellets) in various nooks and crannies particularly in the clothes closet. These must have fallen out of trouser turn-ups. Sheep were obviously not kept in the house or garden. The garden was well maintained with rose bushes and lilac, and in general quite pretty. The house was only a few yards from the bus stop with access to the center of Sutton in a quiet residential area .We very quickly bought ourselves a car, a Datsun, which we used for the total length of the sabbatical, drove it to Scotland and many other parts of the UK and sold at cost when we departed for home. I became used to driving a stick shift, and being on the “ wrong” side of the road. However I did find roundabout’s very confusing, and was often on the wrong side going around and around in circles.

The labs were spacious and well equipped but very little publishable work was accomplished during that year, since most of the work was done in mice, or macrophages isolated from mice and unfortunately the mouse population was infected with a protozoan like parasite, which potentially could influence our results. This was not identified until quite late into the project. However I did gain experience working with tumors in mice, culturing immune cells and learned immunology from attending talks and seminars. This was a subject I had never studied, and this area of cancer research was advancing very quickly.

The typical work day went something like this: arrive at work between 8-9a.m. Coffee or tea break for about 30 minutes around 10a.m. Lunch and a walk on the Downs opposite the institute from 12 -1.30, and then leave for home around 4.0 to avoid rush hour. Since I lived close by, none of this schedule applied to me, and I worked a normal 8-5 day. Apart from the short work -day I also found the English class system disturbing. There

was very little social interaction between the lab personnel, such as technicians and secretaries and the faculty. This became most obvious at Xmas when parties were announced and we would turn up, to find ourselves the only “professionals” among the “hoi poloi” of secretaries and maintenance people. Professor Peter Alexander would appear for a few minutes to welcome every one and add his greetings, but no other members of the faculty were present. One just did not associate with the lower classes.

Professor Peter Alexander was a larger than life character. He was a hefty, good-looking man, with a booming voice. His English had a trace of a German accent, and I believe he was born in Germany. He was born in 1922, so that when I got to know him he was already in his early 50’s. I felt small and insignificant beside him. To quote from his obituary in the Independence “Peter Alexander’s talents were those of a publicist, a communicator, a teacher and a leader rather than those of a bench worker. He was a strategist rather than a tactician. He was basically a romantic and science for him was a personal crusade in which a struggle against daunting odds was a stimulus and not an obstacle. He could only function properly if he felt himself to be at the centre of the affairs that interested him. Then ideas erupted from him in rapid succession and ranged from the penetratingly astute to the hare-brained and often exceeded the resources provided for their completion by several orders of magnitude.” I do not know whether this obituary is flattering or sarcastically nasty.

The Alexander’s lived in a large house out in the country, near Redhill. We were invited for dinner one evening with some other “visitors” to the lab. This was to be quite an elegant affair, so both Mimi and I dressed for the occasion. Unfortunately it was pouring, coming down as they say in ‘Buckets’. Peter appeared with his car to take us to his house, a red convertible. He could not get his convertible to convert so that we arrived slightly damp. We were introduced to Mrs. Alexander (Jane) who was a “horsey” sort of woman, of a very specific upper class English type. She insisted we see her horses, which were used for fox hunting. She put on her Wellingtons, but we had to trek through the mud in our good shoes to the stables. This was particularly galling to the ladies in the company who had put on their best high heels.

At dinner she proudly announced that all we were about to eat was produced on the estate. I think Mimi asked rather innocently whether this included the venison that was served as main course. Of course she exclaimed, I hit this particular animal with my car (I assume accidentally) and brought it home. She then told us a story which I think is classic. She had been breeding hamsters for sometime and had too many of them. She called Harrods of London, and asked whether they carried this breed pretending she wanted to purchase some. She was very indignant when they told her they did not have any in stock. A few weeks later in a disguised voice, she called Harrods and asked whether they would be interested in purchasing such a strain of Hamsters. Remembering the last conversation, and quite sure there would be a demand; they offered to buy them from her. Thus she was able to dispose of her unwanted animals. I don't know why she was breeding them unless watching them gave her a sexual thrill, since the dinner conversation that evening was very risqué and slightly embarrassing.

The year in London was enjoyable. We went quite often to the theatre and to opera. We could not afford the best seats in the old Convent Garden Opera House, so would climb an interminable amount of stairs to the top balconies, from which you could barely see the stage. The stairs were totally unadorned and reminded me of the stairs up the tenements in the poorer parts of Glasgow. Theatre was not as expensive as the opera, and I remember we saw a fantastic performance of Shakespeare's Pericles performed in the round. We found an excellent Italian restaurant in Wimbledon, one where large Italian families gathered for Sunday lunch. This was the days before there were large numbers of good Indian restaurants in England. We would occasionally meet my cousin Alan and wife Francis and have dinner together, usually to an Italian Restaurant in the city. There was a bus service from the institute into the city frequently during the day, but not in the evenings and Mimi would often go into the city to museums and shopping.

The children went to English public school, that means school run by the local councils. Yuval was in the class that sat 11+ exams, and Jonathan must have been in 3rd grade. We were worried about the kids attending a "foreign" school, but that was unnecessary. The first day at school, Yuval phoned and asked if it was O.K. to go to tea with one of the kids he had met. He became very good friends with two of his classmates, a Jamie

Pimstone, and Marcus Wright. He seemed to fit in very well. We also became quite good friends with the Pimestones, who were South African Jews who had moved to England. They were from a rather famous family of S. African lawyers and doctors. Years later I met other members of the family at scientific meetings. We often were invited for dinner and other parties. Yuval sat his 11+ exams with flying colors and if we had stayed in Sutton would have gone to a prestigious grammar school. Jonathan also adapted very well, his teacher remarking how well he did considering he was an American. In fact at the beginning of the school year, it was assumed by the teachers that our children would not be up to the standard of the other children, but they were quickly proven wrong. One of Jonathan's teachers even remarked that he spelt rather well for an American! This negative attitude to American kids even carried over to a vacation in the country. This was a farm vacation where one stayed on the farm, ate with other visitors, and generally "lazed" around, went hiking etc. On our first evening on the farm, we were segregated from the other guests, and put in a separate room for dinner. The following evening we were allowed to join the other guests. Our hostess was worried that the "American" kids would have no manners and make too much noise.

I remember driving the length and breadth of Britain to visit manor houses and castles. Jonathan was crazy about toy soldiers and we took the opportunity to visit places such as Blenheim Castle and many others with their large collections. Mimi loved gardens, and there was no shortage of these in Britain. We explored the border country of Scotland and spent some time exploring the Welsh countryside. We have returned to these places many times since.

We did go up to Glasgow a few times to visit the family. The family lived in the same house I lived in when I was 16, before I left Glasgow, at 90 Holeburn Rd. I do not remember very much of these visits. Maurice my brother must have been around 21 years old. That is also 21 years younger than I. I do not remember whether he was going out with Barbara, his wife to be or not. My sisters Adelaide and Beatrice by this time were married and had children. In fact we visited Beatrice and Noah in Sheffield, and made some trips to York and the surrounding areas. Adelaide and John lived in Glasgow, their children Aaron about the same age as our Jonathan and Naomi a toddler. My parents were delighted to

meet their grandchildren, and I remember the children being spruced up for my cousin Muriel Mitchells wedding. I should add that this is one cousin I have no contact with. She divorced shortly after the wedding, and completely disappeared. Rumor is that she fell out with her father when he remarried after the death of Sadie, his wife.

The visits to Holeburn Rd touched an emotional raw spot. No 98 was where my grandmother and grandfather had lived, until the death of my grandfather. I was very close to my grandparents and spent many weekends with my grandmother. I was the first grandchild, and my grandparents really made a great deal of fuss over me, and during the war years I spent as much time with them as I did at home. My leaving school, and then home must have been a great shock to them. I do not think my grandmother (by this time my grandfather had died in 1951) ever understood why. Unfortunately she died shortly after I married Mimi in 1957 without ever meeting her. . She most certainly would have approved of the marriage and my subsequent life.

We also visited my Aunt Betty, my mother's sister and her husband Ernie in Brighton. She would phone Mimi at odd times and keep her on the phone for hours. She was a very neurotic person, spending half her life in bed. We would make arrangements to go out to a concert together (I remember in particular we were going to hear the famous Flamenco performer, Manitas de Plata, who recently died), and at the last moment Ernie came by himself, Betty was not feeling well. She drove him quite crazy; he had to attend to her hand and foot, and all her whims. She never recovered from the death of her son (Jeffrey), killed in a car accident at the age of 20, and she was not particularly fond of her other son Derek. He was not a match to Jeffrey, either in looks or in personality. Together she and Ernie ran an antique store in Brighton, having closed two very successful stores in London, and moved out of the city to the coast. Much later Ernie left Betty; he could not take her anymore. My aunt Betty deserves a chapter or book on her own. I have a copy of her memoirs written for my son Yuval during this time, which give a lucid account of the family history, all the scandals and affairs, which certainly would have been of no interest to an 11 year old.

We also went on some great holidays from England. These were the days of cheap charter flights. We flew to Tunisia for a week, to Hammemat, staying in a resort called Les

Orangers. We rented a car and drove into Tunis City and into the desert and Kharouan, a Muslim holy city. Tunisia was fascinating. The hotel and food were great, there was dancing in the evenings, once even accompanied by a knife brawl (after all this was North Africa). We got stuck in a wadi in the desert (the edge of the Sahara) and had to have the car pulled out by a group of Arab children. This was a time when Tunis was a benevolent dictatorship under Bourgaiba, and very open to visitors. It was not particularly "Muslim" in the current sense, although women did cover themselves. However there was also a secular side to the country. The 'souk' in Tunis was fascinating as was in particular Kharouan with its mosques. This is regarded as the fourth most holy city in Islam, and dates to the 7th century. It has a huge mosque and fortress. We wandered around the city with no problems, not something I think could be done today. In those days it was quite safe.

Over spring vacation we went to Spain to Mohacar, a very windy isolated village near Almeria. We stayed near the top of a mountain and the wind howled non-stop. It felt as if our hotel would be blown away. The village itself is completely white, and looks similar to the villages on the Greek islands. The same square shaped houses. We had planned to cross the Sierra Nevada and visit Grenada. We rented a Volkswagen "bug", unfortunately not in the best condition, and headed out over the mountains. We had not driven very far when people started making signs to us to turn around. We had no idea why until we hit a terrific snowstorm. The car was a catastrophe; the windshield wipers did not work and the brakes were weak. Here we were on a narrow mountain road going over very steep passes, with no turn offs, and being blinded by the snow. Eventually we did find a spot on the road wide enough to turn round, and drove slowly back to the coast. It was not until many years later that we actually did get to see the Alhambra in Granada, not in winter and not from the coast.

Another short trip was to Paris for the weekend. This trip had specific meaning for me, since before making it I had been summoned to the local police station to register as a foreigner. All foreigners had to register after being in the UK for three months. I explained to the girl working in the office that I actually was not foreign, but born in Glasgow, Scotland. She did not quite know what to do with me, and sent me to another office of the interior ministry in London. I explained my predicament. I had arrived in the UK with an

USA passport (Mimi actually had used her British passport, not yet being a U.S. citizen), and thus technically I had overstayed my welcome, and needed permission to continue working. I was asked whether I had any plans to leave the UK for a short time. Since I did, I was told to leave on my US passport and return to Britain with my new British Passport, which was issued within a few weeks. This satisfied the computer (?) the bureaucrats or records. The weekend in Paris was a great success. We stayed in luxury at the Scribe Hotel, an old 19th century hotel near the Place L'Opera and Pl Vendome. The hotel dates from 1860 and was famous at the turn of the century as the home of the Jockey Club, a society of owners of racing horses. We did the usual, went to the Opera, ate well, and spent time at the Louvre.

I should add a few words about this particular year. As stated above it was the year of the great coal miner's strikes, and also the Yom Kippur war. I remember watching the war unfold on television with great trepidation at the beginning and relief afterwards at the Israeli victory. There was a general shortage of fuel in the UK and the government imposed all sorts of measures to preserve electricity. This was a result of the miners strike. The British people behaved again as if in WWII. Shops ran by candle light in the evening instead of electricity. People talked about how great it was to re-live these austerity conditions again. The British obviously love nostalgia, and longing for the good old days. Austerity created a unique atmosphere. The disputes lasted for 16 weeks, and it was only after a general election that the strike was settled. Both Mimi and I voted in that election as citizens of the U.K. I remember voting for the "liberal" party, but I cannot remember why other than that my brother Maurice was active in the party and convinced me to do so. Anyhow Labor won, and the miners received a 35% increase in salary.

Looking back, it was an interesting year. We were all quite happy in our surroundings, and lived relatively well as the English middle class .We probably could have adapted long term. Scientifically I learned a great deal of immunology, however because of the mishap in the mouse colony, there were no publications and unfortunately no long-term connections. It was important for my parents and my children to spend sometime with each other. Both children remember the year fondly, and it added to their experience.

However we were glad to return to Bloomington. We started building the house that we still live in to this day.