

### **Ch. 3b. The shop-1947-48**

The family had furniture stores (used and new) as far back as I can remember. My grandfather Mitchell had a large store on Paisley Road West. I remember going there as a child quite often. It was next to a park (Kinning Park), and not far from a cinema, called the Lorne. Apparently this was made into a Bingo Hall in 1976, and then demolished in 1986. This area is famous for being the home of the Rangers football team, until this day a place of strong anti-Catholic feeling. My grandmother's house was a few blocks from the store, on Paisley Road West. Since this was further west (in the direction of Paisley) it was a nicer neighborhood, and flats were spacious. However it still was what was called a tenement. My grandparents always had a maid in these days to do the house keeping and the serving of meals. My Uncle David worked in the store, as did my Aunt Betty. This was good training for their futures, since both ended up later on opening their own business. The local school in the neighborhood was the scene of many clashes between Protestant kids and Catholics kids on Orange Parade day, a day celebrating the Protestant victory over the Catholics in Ireland at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. The organization was called the Orange Lodge, after the Prince of Orange, who became William III of a united Britain. It was a protestant organization, and reflected the anti-Catholicism of its day. This religious feeling was tied into the rivalry between the football teams of the Rangers versus the Celtics, which played at nearby Ibrox Park. Being Jewish, I was not caught up in this rivalry, and stood aside; I suppose not knowing where I belonged in this "religious" struggle. I don't think it truly was religious, but more a matter of native Scots (Protestants) versus Irish immigrants (the Catholics)

My father's first store was in a run-down, very slummy part of the city, in Houston St. We lived close by in Pollok St. It was near Shields Road, since I attended school in Scotland Street Primary School, now a museum. Apparently there were not enough children in this neighborhood by the late 1970's, to warrant keeping the school open, and in 1980 it was converted to a museum of education in part because it was built by the famous architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The area was very run down, full of drunks, and grey/black tenement houses. This was as much as we could afford, since my parents lost everything including their home during the depression of the 1930's. This shop in Houston St was in existence until some

time during the war, when my father was conscripted, and instead of serving in the army, worked in the shipyards (John Brown) as a riveter. This was one of the largest ship building yards in Clydebank. He was exempted from the army because he had three small children. It was during this time that he came under the influence of the communist party. All I remember was the name Fraser, which cropped up in conversation and I assume that this was Hamish Fraser who was the communist organizer on the docks at this time. This introduced me to the “ Daily Worker” the communist newspaper, which reinforced my own ideas of the world and which I avidly read.

After being released from the shipyards, which I assume was either at the end or towards the end of the war, my father, opened a store in Maryhill Rd. Again this was a very poor, working class neighborhood. The shop was in a good location not far from a central crossroad, St George’s Cross, and close to the subway station on the Great Western Road. Glasgow has one of the oldest subway systems in the world being opened in 1896. Only the London and Budapest undergrounds are older. It is a loop system that runs under the river Clyde and connects areas on both sides of the river. I used to use the system to get from the South side to the shop, directly from school or from my grandparents. Today it is difficult to recognize the area, since there are expressways overhead, and St George’s cross has disappeared. I used to also walk from school through the city center to reach the shop. After a few years a larger shop was opened further up Maryhill Rd, while eventually the older store was either sold or rented to my uncle David Mitchell.

The store always smelt musty and of furniture polish. Mrs. Stuart was the “ French polisher”, the person who stripped of the old paint and varnished and polished the old furniture until it looked new. French Polishing is a technique in which many layers of shellac and other finishing compounds, including linseed oil are applied to the furniture. It is a very labor-intensive job. Mrs. Stuart was a very hearty, jovial woman, very Scottish, and very upset when her daughter married an Englishman. Could this have been the Stuart heritage? The furniture was a mix of “ junk” and antiques, and old solid Victoriana. I took a dislike to all the smelly old stuff, and to the downtrodden customers.

The customers were a cross section of the neighborhood. There were those visiting from the Highlands, who seemed more polite and better dressed than the locals. Occasionally there were customers from Norway. In particular I remember one woman who came to the store quite often,

a remarkable looking woman and her presence resulted in a jealousy attack from my mother. There were those who came in to hang out, as you might say, lonely people looking for conversation and those who were stoned and drunk on “red biddy” which I believe was methylated alcohol mixed with red wine. In particular I remember one old woman who always looked bedraggled and smelt terribly of a mixture of dirt, sweat and booze.

In the back of the store there was a small kitchen, or space for making tea with a small stove, and a small dirty toilet. There always seemed to be people hanging around this area. In fact I think they were mostly plain-clothes policemen, since there was a lot of petty crime in the area. These were big guys, about 6 feet tall, built like football players. They would spend the day drinking tea and filling out the “pool”, a betting form predicting football team winnings and score.

When I was about 16 and began to be uninterested in school studies I often worked in the shop. I would open the store in the morning, wash the windows with a pole attachment, dust the furniture and wait on customers. I found the process quite boring, and would saunter off down Maryhill road looking at other stores, or go in and talk to the women who worked in the R.S.McColl sweet store a few doors down. During the war years and after I would spend my sweet rationing coupons in this store. The ration was ample, I think 4 ozs per week, and as a result my teeth suffered, and I am paying for this now. Next door there was a butcher store, which always smelt of meat. This was the days before refrigeration and the meat would hang as carcasses at the back of the store. I suppose they must have had blocks of ice delivered. Lots of deliveries were made by horse and cart.

The store remained in business until my father's death. I think he wanted to hand it over to John Duncan, my brother in law. A second store was opened nearby on Burnbank Terrace, a betting store (Bookie). Betting on Greyhound dog racing and horse racing had become legal and was a thriving business.

For many years I have avoided going into a secondhand furniture store. It brought back too many bad memories. In retrospect selling second hand furniture is no worse than any other retail business, and with the large number of garage sales in the US, people are always looking for bargains. I think that the education I received in the movement (Habonim) instilled in me a sort

of disgust of business. It was associated with Diaspora Jewry and bourgeois life, the antithesis of what we (or I) was going to become in Israel.