

Childhood, Youth and Zionism.

I must have joined Habonim when I was about 10 years old. That would have been 1941. The group was called Gedud Degania after the first kibbutz established in Palestine. All the groups had names of kibbutzim in what was at that time Palestine, and gedud means battalion, or some such thing. This was the name given to the youngest groups; the teen groups were called plugot. Interesting how these became military terms in the Israeli army, or was it the other way around? Those may have been biblical military terms.

We learned the Habonim promise “I promise as a Boneh to uphold the good name of the Jewish people ... “ and built bricks out of cardboard and glue to represent the building bricks of the pioneers. This ceremony, equivalent to a scout’s ceremony was known as the “ hakdasha”, basically “ dedication”. This was a pioneer youth movement, similar to the boy scouts except with Zionism thrown in. We learned songs all about building the new “ homeland”, dances such as the Hora, mayim-mayim (water-water), a precious substance in that part of the world, some scouting, knot making, camping skills etc. We met as a group of kids, perhaps 15 of us every Sunday afternoon at Queen’s Park Synagogue. I remember this as a beautiful building, surrounded by a wooded garden. The first time I went there, by mistake I walked into the church next door, and sat down with other kids learning about Jesus. I quickly realized that something was wrong, and approached the woman teaching and asked whether this was Habonim. She quickly directed me to the synagogue. I do not remember whom our madrichim (leaders) were (Sylvia Poli ? Robert Weber ?) nor do I remember many of the other kids. I actually have kept up with both of the above, meeting Robert occasionally in New York and Sylvia in Israel. I think at that time the group was led by Eva Ross my Hebrew teacher. but no one seems to remember her. I was quiet and a little introverted compared to most of the other kids. I do remember others in the group including, Agnes Benjamin, Basil Rifkind. Victor Kurtzman (whom I believe became a Chabad Rabbi in S. California), and Judith Wolfsohn. Much later, when I was about 13-14 I hung out with Tommy Berman and Basil Rifkind. I always appreciated Tommy, thought him very clever, and admired his superb self built electric train set. I would occasionally go to his

house, to the Millers, for “tea” and spend time playing with this wonderful set. Basil was less “cultured”, more outgoing, and always a little rough on the outside. He did become a famous cardiologist later on and head of the US-NIH heart section. He retired as chief of the NHLBI's lipid metabolism and atherosclerosis branch in 2000. It was Basil who proposed the relationship between cholesterol levels and heart attack. He died of Parkinson's in 2008. I have since found out that he did go on Aliya as a physician, but one of his children had leukemia, and the best treatment at that time was in the USA. Thus he came to the US because of the son, and stayed on at the NIH. By chance I met one of his son's recently on a trip to Bethesda. A small world.

Thus although I went to Hutcheson's Boys Grammar school, my social life evolved around Habonim and also around some of the same kids who attended cheder either at Queens Park or Niddrie Rd Shul. I really had no close friends from school. Only later on did I become friendly with Donald Dickson, went to his house for dinner occasionally, and met his family. I think I was a curiosity to his family, being “foreign” i.e. Jewish. Thus I was more interested in Jewish /Zionist affairs than what was going on around me in Scotland or at school. Later on I also occasionally attended Bnei Akiva, a Religious-Zionist youth movement. The meetings were held right across the street from our house on Dixon Avenue. Most of those attending were not native Glaswegians, but refugees from Europe. They seemed to me and particularly to my parents and other members of the community as “strange” people, rather uppity. I have learned since then that this was a case of us, the Eastern European Jews and then the German Jews, with the same suspicions and attitudes that occurred in all Jewish communities. We were suspicious of each other. Many of them must have been saved in the “kinder transport”. Tommy, my friend referred to above was one of the kinder transport kids from Czechoslovakia. Also there was much more religion in B'nei Akiva, which at specific times appealed to me, and other times turned me off. In general we talked about the girls of Bnei Akiva being prettier than those in Habonim. I discussed this many years later with Julian Davidson, a fellow Glaswegian, whom I met as a faculty member at Stanford University. Julian was a regular at the B'nei Akiva and also Bachad the more senior movement. My attitude to religion was one of confusion. Sometimes I went to Shul on Friday nights and Shabbat morning, other times I stayed away. At home we were “traditional”, and yet I hung up a stocking at Xmas and expected presents until about the age of 10. I did go to Cheder regularly from the age of 10, and had a Bar mitzvah in Queens Park Shul.

The only teacher's I remember were a Mr. Zwebner, and Rabbi Singer. I do not recall whether they were from Queens Park or Niddrie Road or who taught me for my bar mitzvah.

Tommy, Basil and I would occasionally go out together and roam the Queens Park area. My favorite haunt was Victoria Rd. equivalent then to today's malls. This was a broad street, with shops on sides, ice cream café's and bakeries leading up to the main entrance of Queens Park. There was an excellent ice cream shop called the Bluebird Cafe (at the entrance to the park near Shawlands. This park played an important role in my young life. When I was much younger (5-6 perhaps) I would sail my boat in Queen's park pond, and go fishing for minnows (Guppies). My father would take me to feed the ducks and swans of which there were many different varieties. This I remember doing with my father on Sunday mornings. There was often a concert in the park on Sunday afternoons, or sometimes in the long summer evenings. I remember going with my sisters Beatrice and Adelaide to the park and listening to some operatic arias sung by a rather large soprano, and giggling all the way through. The park had everything, swings, rose gardens, flower beds, green houses. It was a breath of the country in the midst of the city. The park was opened in 1857 and was designed by the world renowned Sir Joseph Paxton, also responsible for noted public parks in London, Liverpool, Birkenhead and the grounds of the Spa Buildings at Scarborough. The park was dedicated to the memory of Mary, Queen of Scots and not Queen Victoria, a common misconception given the proximity to Victoria Road and that the park was created during her reign. (Wikipedia). In fact the park is on or near the site of the battle of Langside which took place in 1568 between the forces loyal to Mary Queen of Scots and her Protestant half brother the Earl of Moray who was fighting on behalf of James VI, Mary's infant son. The park is huge, covering some 148 acres. It has many entrances, flower gardens, and great walking trails.

To get back to my childhood: I went through a very nationalist stage during my early teens. This was a result of news coming out of Europe on the massacre of European Jewry and the activities of the British in trying to stop immigration into Palestine. This was the period of the Jewish underground activity against the British right after the end of WWII. I was thus a mixed up kid, tending to the violent side of the Zionist movement and also at the same time to the socialist side, reading the Daily Worker (which incidentally was also supportive at that time the

Jewish struggle against the British) and the right wing revisionist (Zionist) newspaper. Both papers claimed that Britain was an imperialist power, attempting to destroy the nascent Jewish State. There is no doubt that this was the aim of Ernest Bevin the foreign minister of the time. His Anti-Semitism was quite open. To an impressionable youth, the betrayal by the Labor party was felt very keenly, and possibly led to my desire to get out of Britain and immigrate myself to Israel. Thus by 1947 I was ready to go on Hachshara, a communal farm run by Habonim, which was supposed to prepare one for Israel. I have written elsewhere about my time on Hachshara, a happy time in my life. Lots of intellectual activities, music, discussions etc. While in England I fell in love with the English countryside, as well as a few members of the opposite sex. Some of this will be described in the next chapter.

Another event that had a profound influence on me was an attack on my father's shop. This must have been in 1947 after the hanging of two British soldiers by the Irgun. The shop windows were smashed. I don't remember if anything was written on the shop windows. Since there was nothing on the outside to indicate that this shop was owned by a Jew, this must have been done by some local ruffians who knew my father. This reminded me of Nazi Germany and obviously had an effect on an impressionable teen-ager. There were riots in Glasgow, Liverpool and elsewhere at this time. (I thought for a time that this might be my imagination, but I found descriptions of the riots on the internet).

My other early interest was music, and my then aim was to be a pianist. I must have started piano lessons at the age of 6, from a Mr. Wilson. He was the organist at a local church somewhere in the Maryhill area. He appeared to me to be elderly, but as a child everyone probably did. At some point he decided he could not teach me any more, so I started studying at the Orr School of Music, my teacher being a Mrs. Sweeney. She was a very capable teacher, and the school kept to the standards set by the London Royal Academy of Music, with annual exams. I think I progressed up to grade V. The exams consisted of playing a few pieces of music before a committee and answering some questions on theory. This "academy" was also on Dixon Avenue, so that my life revolved around this area. Again as in school I began to lose interest in this about the age of 16. However I did give some recitals as part of programs arranged either through the Zionist movement, cheder or Habonim. I do remember one such concert in which I accompanied Agnes Benjamin in some Hebrew songs. She had a very nice voice. I also played some waltzes by Chopin. I cannot remember where these concerts were held. For a short period

I also taught the piano to a few pupils at home. This was after dropping out of school when I had more time and needed to earn some money.

I seemed to have wandered off again. However by the age of 16, not doing well at school, not being interested in my father's store (I did work there for a few months after leaving school, see next blog). I was uncomfortable at home, being very snobbish about the lack of education and culture in the home that I decided the best option for me was to go on Hachshara (commune). I just lazed around and did not really want to do any work or find a job after quitting school. I must have been a horrible teen-ager, causing no end of problems to my parents and sisters. As I discuss later, I was quite happy on hachshara. I seemed to have lost most of my inhibitions, was quite popular, and had quite an active sex life (by the standard of the day). I did not mind the hard work (farming), the cycling in the cold to work, or studying Hebrew in the evenings. I hope I can describe some humorous episodes in a subsequent blog.