

New York: 1958

We arrived in New York at the end of August 1958. We had \$10 in our pocket (perhaps it was a little more or less), and we planned to take the bus directly to Ithaca, New York, and I to study for the BS in poultry husbandry in the Ag School at Cornell University. The bus trip took about six hours. It was the week before the term began, and the type of housing available shocked us. We had no idea what to expect. We had not registered for student housing, (our fault and lack of time) and looked at old decrepit clapboard houses, with an offer to rent, provisional on cleaning snow, or some accommodation in a basement with no windows. Most would have cost us more than any salary Mimi might earn. Having just arrived from white, gleaming sunny Haifa, Ithaca, or at least “College Town” seemed gloomy, run down and grey. Actually Ithaca itself is in a very beautiful area, with abundant lakes and water falls, but the downtown looked very neglected.

Since I was considered a foreign student, an Israeli student David Prihar drove Mimi and I around and from him we got an idea of the expenses incurred in attending Cornell. I could call these years of our life the years of naivety. Certainly this was not the America we had imagined, although in all honesty I don't know what we imagined. It was obvious that we could not afford the tuition or the rent, and thus we opted back to New York City to live with Rutta and Salo (Mimi's parents) who had moved into an apartment in the Bronx. Luckily I was able to delay my acceptance by a year, during which time I became a resident of the State of New York and thus qualified for New York State tuition considerably less than out of state. Part of Cornell was a State University, part private.

We also learned from David Prihar of the presence of another foreign student, Ralph Mitchell, from Ireland, but with a connection to Israel, since my mothers' maiden name was Mitchell and I had heard of family living in Dublin and Belfast, I was anxious to contact Ralph. phoned and asked whether he had any connection to the Glasgow Mitchells, and he replied “ yes, he had visited his uncle many years ago”. This was probably my grandfather or more likely my mother's Uncle Robert, who had more Irish connection, having lived in Belfast for a few years. From my Aunt Betty's writings, I learned recently that my great grandmother, and thus Ralph's

grandmother had died in Belfast after an IRA attack on a nearby barracks. Ralph was my mother's first cousin, and we had found a new relative in the USA! Interestingly Ralph was studying for the Ph.D. in microbiology. If I had not been so set on studying Poultry Husbandry, I might have met and discussed the future of microbiology and my own future with him. As it was, we agreed to meet sometime during the year in New York City. I also learned that he had been a member of Habonim in Dublin and that we had a number of mutual acquaintances. He had worked a year at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel before coming to Cornell. Thus our lives were quiet parallel and got me wondering about the genetics of the family.

Mimi's father had been living with his brother Paul and family. Rutta arrived without knowing that we would be coming and they had found an apartment on 190<sup>th</sup> Street and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Thus, we moved into their apartment and slept in the living room. We paid Rutta and Salo a nominal sum (I can not remember how much) for room and board. Mimi's Uncle Paul had been living in the USA since some time in the mid 30's and he and his wife Dushka had two daughters, Claudette and Madeleine. Madeleine was approximately Mimi's age, and she assisted my enrolling in evening classes at CCNY. I do not recall meeting "Claudie" in New York. She and her father had a terrible row before our arrival. Apparently he wanted her to lead a "social" life of dance, mix with a certain set, wear makeup, all of which she refused to do. She was interested in more intellectual pursuits, even contemplating the idea of immigrating to Israel, or so at least I have been told. Paul was very much against this. She thus left home and lived with a man, Dick Ehrlich. I do not know whether they were married or not but she had two children delivered under very primitive conditions, some say in the woods of Connecticut. Claudie ended up having many children, Dick was a drug addict, and as can be expected, had many problems later on. Paul was a very domineering individual. He was a physician in the Veteran's Administration Hospital, always formally dressed with a bow tie and jacket, and insisted on everyone behaving and dressing like him, being "American". In fact he did not approve of my dress (open shirt, no tie) and made some caustic remarks about dressing like a kibbutznik. Dushka on the other hand was a very submissive and kindly person, and I don't know how she suffered all these years of marriage to Paul. There were other "Reifer" relatives in New York, whom we would occasionally visit. Thus we had a new family. Unfortunately we did not maintain these connections on leaving New York. My in-laws and Paul and family eventually followed us to California. After something

like 50 years we have met Claudie in California and have become quite good friends with Janie, one of her daughters.

What about my education? This was the reason for coming to the States! Had we made a mistake? Living in the Bronx was certainly not my dream of the USA. This area of the Bronx, 190<sup>th</sup> and Grand Concourse was considered an upscale Jewish middle-class neighborhood. The major landmark was Alexander's Department store on the Grand Concourse, which was a busy shopping street. The neighborhood was quite safe. We had advice from Salo and also from Mimi's uncle Paul, as to the direction to take for the future, the best plan was to attend evening school at CCNY, to take basic courses, so that when I did return to Cornell University the following year, it would be easy to get credit transferred (I still was not familiar with this whole idea of credits). I thus enrolled in courses in freshman physics, chemistry, geology, and Psychology. Of this latter course all I remember was the lecturer standing on the desk to make a point. I do not recall having learned very much, although I did finish with A's. In the geology class we made many field trips to the N.J. Palisades to study the different strata, I enjoyed the field trips, the course was well taught, and this course was the most interesting. This gave me a semester of credit later on at Cornell and speeded up my eventual graduation. Mimi found a job as an analytical chemical lab technician with the cosmetic company, Revlon. She earned enough to support both of us through this period. The lab was situated in Harlem, and the subway ride was quite unpleasant in the winter when it was dark, and we often worried about safety. In fact after Haifa, New York seemed to us quite dangerous, with drunks, pickpockets and other petty crime. The upper Bronx was not bad, but the area of CCNY around 125<sup>th</sup> street was undergoing change and was quite seedy and decrepit. The drive in the subway was unpleasant, crowded, smelly, and unsafe. There were drunkards in the evenings, sometimes with vomit and piss on the floor.

I went down to the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) office in Manhattan and they were successful in finding me a job. In fact they found me a series of jobs, none of which lasted very long. First as a bookkeeper in the fruit market. This job lasted one day, since the owner could not read my handwriting, which tends to be small and messy, and I had no idea how to balance the books. I then worked in a small workshop that produced tools for sculptors and artists, certainly a job with very limited potential, and then later after this job fizzled (not through any fault of mine) packaging Neon lights for a wholesaler. These jobs paid very little and were

quite far from the Bronx. In fact these were in lower Manhattan, below 14<sup>th</sup> Street, at that time a poor neighborhood, but today gentrified and full of skyscrapers and high-rise apartments. Exasperated with the situation of poor paying lousy jobs, I began to search the New York Times Classified section. I found a job advertised for a person with mathematical experience. In fact it stipulated a degree in mathematics.

Although I did not have degree in mathematics, I had sat the London University Matriculation (High School) external exams. Mimi had tutored me in this. I did not do very well in Mathematics, however I just mentioned London University to the person doing the interviewing, and I was hired on the spot. No one asked to see my credentials and I did not lie. I think Howie my new boss just assumed I had a degree in mathematics, or it really did not matter since no one else had a degree in math. The company was called Arbitron, a TV and radio rating company. Small electronic gadgets were placed in individuals TV sets, and we in the office on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street received a transmission indicating the channels people were watching at any specific time. This was recorded and then we calculated the percentage of a population (in a specific city watching that program. The extent of the mathematics was calculating percentages on a Monroe calculator! It was a great job, it paid well and my work colleagues were terrific. A reporting board would light up to indicate what home was watching what broadcast. We would record this and thus calculate the results. This information was then sold to the networks and advertisers for large (enormous) sums of money. In fact it give me some idea of how much money changed hands in the advertising and TV industry, signifying the importance of ratings.

It was interesting to note how fickle the public could be. Wagon Train was one of the most popular programs. Anytime President Eisenhower addresses the nation there would be massive switching of channels. Westerns always won out. In these days there were no more than 6-7 channels available, the three major networks and a few local N.Y. channels.

The group of co-workers at ARB was terrific. There was Howard, the boss, a rather portly 30 something, then the work crew of Harvey (BS in history), Robert (part time Opera singer and actor), Thelma (ex beauty queen of somewhere in NY), and Victor, of whom I do not remember very much, other than that he had a great sense of humor. We all worked in the same office on 3rd Avenue and 53rd street.

Robert was quite a character. He loved women, particularly women with black stockings.

He would stand by the window, looking out over 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, and as soon as a woman passed by with black stockings he would run down the stairs, catch up with her, and somehow (or so it seemed) arrange a subsequent date, if her face matched her legs. It was a sort of fetish that all of us laughed at. We really did not believe his stories. He claimed the best place to pick up young women was the New York Metropolitan Museum (or Momma). The technique was to approach the victim, who had to be wearing black stockings, and enter into conversation on the painting being viewed, and then enchant his way into a subsequent meeting or into bed. These were the days before the sexual revolution although I do not think he had any inhibitions. He was quite a charmer, was good-looking, very Italian and had great style. He also could sing.

Two years later while at Cornell University, we became acquainted with a couple of fairly attractive female, Israeli students. They were planning a weekend in New York City. Bihla, the older of the two wore black stockings, fashionable in these days. After the weekend in the city, she told us that she had surprisingly met an acquaintance of ours at the Met. She in fact confirmed the stories we had heard from Robert, she was wearing black stockings and he had picked her up as described by getting into an “art” conversation. I don’t know what happened after that, other than my name came up in conversation, and the information got back to me. I met Robert many years later, after having completed my Ph.D. and while attending a meeting in New York, and found a rather down and out ex-actor, most of the charm having gone, and carrying a broken arm, as the result of being thrown out of the window by an another actor who found him in flagrante with his wife. He was still performing in summer stock in Upstate New York. I would really have like to have spent more time with this guy; it would have been very interesting to hear his life story. He would be a great character for a novel.

I was to return to ARB again during my years at Cornell for summer employment. Howard asked me many times to stay on and not return to Ithaca, that I could have a permanent job. If I had done so, and moved up in the company as others did I could have retired as a millionaire at the age of 40. ! I never really gave it a second thought, since our idea was still to return to Israel, after obtaining my BS in agriculture. I was still very much an idealist, and both Mimi and I agreed that this was our ultimate aim. The thought of living in New City did not appeal to Mimi. She is just not a city person. I on the other hand found the city exciting. We did not consider ourselves permanent immigrants to the US; this was just a temporary situation, a first step in my education. I have no idea what happened to members of the ARB group. I know

that Harvey, the history major retired early, since I contacted him on one of my visits to New York. ARB is still in existence, but not nearly as successful as its rival Neilson, and recently it has run afoul of the State of New York Legal System.

I do not want to give the impression that life in New York was gloomy, far from it. We enjoyed the lovely countryside at weekends going out with Rutta and Salo; we explored the area north of New York City, the Hudson River, and Bear Park Mt. I loved going to the Cloisters just north of Manhattan. We went for walks in the Bronx zoo and Botanical gardens, one of the best in the world. We went to concerts at Carnegie Hall (Van Cliburn was the rage), to the Metropolitan opera, to the museums. Our social life was not bad either. We had family in the city, Mimi's cousins, we made friends with other students, met with an old friend from Glasgow/Israel, Tommy Berman whom I have mentioned before, and spent a few weeks on the island of Nantucket that first summer, a place we loved to return to.

We also met Ralph Mitchell and wife Muriel, by listening for someone with an Irish accent on Columbus Circle one Sunday afternoon. We immediately became friends, a friendship that has lasted all our lives. This is an interesting story in itself. We had no idea what Ralph and his wife looked like. We arranged to meet in Columbus circle on a Saturday afternoon, not realizing how busy it would be with people going to the movies or just walking around. My wife had the bright idea of each one of us follow the couples of suitable age and listen for an Irish accent, which we knew they had after our telephone conversations. After about 30 minutes of this she recognized the accent, stopped and asked if they were Ralph and Muriel and of course they were. Looking back it seems ridiculous, looking for someone with an Irish accent in New York. There are probably more Irishmen in the city than in Ireland itself.

I joined the international student organization at CCNY. Immediately we were befriended by a couple of students, one I remember Albert; the other I cannot remember his name. Both were left wing Jewish students who identified with the Soviet Union rather than with United States or Israel. I found their pride in being of Russian "origin" peculiar. We went to a few parties with them and a few meetings. We both felt very out of place with this group. Although from a socialist background, we did not identify with communism or feel sympathy for their cause. However through them we met students from Nigeria, Ghana and other African countries. It was an interesting period. Dances were held at the international center and one did not know

with whom one would end up dancing with. Mimi ended up dancing with someone with tribal markings on his face. She thought they were paint and only in the light did she see they were scarified markings. She was quite shocked. I think both of us were rather insular, never having been exposed to such exotic people. At the time we left Israel, Africans were rather rare. This was before the immigration of Ethiopian Jews.

Politics did not interest us too much. This was the height of the cold war and everyone worried about a nuclear attack. I remember on New Years Eve we went to see the movie “on the beach” about a nuclear war, with just a few survivors in Australia. It was a depressing film and why we went to see it at New Year is beyond me now. If I remember correctly Tommy and Debbie were in town, we met at an automat restaurant in Times Square and then went to see the film.

During this period I became a resident of New York State, since I worked and paid taxes in the State. On the advice of Tommy I applied for a fellowship for Jewish boys in farming, and since my intention was to join the Poultry Husbandry Department at Cornell, I certainly qualified for the fellowship. Thus after one year in New York City we set of again for Cornell University. By this time I had applied for student housing and we obtained, in Cornell Quarters, old army duplex huts, reminiscent of my days in the kibbutz and army in Israel. Thus in the fall of 1959 we arrived at Cornell University.

Looking back 1958 was a difficult year. Mimi was quite unhappy. Our marriage was strained either because of that, being in a “ foreign” environment, my lack of work, and I don’t think that Mimi’s father had much confidence in me. After all I was still uneducated, could not earn a living, and certainly was not ready to support a family on my own. He did not approve of our idea of returning to Israel. Salo had his own problems; his own position at work was not assured. In fact he was laid off a number of times. These were difficult times.