

Illness



IT WAS DURING the latter years of the Boumat period that I was unexpectedly and without warning struck by ill-health. I had been a smoker since the age of 15, and when I stopped some ten years earlier, it had been because of the realisation of the stupidity of smoking fifty and more cigarettes a day. At my routine annual medical check-up, Ian Schapkaitz, a good friend, decided that everyone should have a chest X-ray on his file. Over my protestations, because I was superficially in perfect health with no symptoms of anything, it was done. Unusually, the radiologist asked to see me and suggested that I see my doctor before leaving for home. Still totally unsuspectingly, I found a white-faced Ian holding an X-ray plate up to the light in a visibly trembling hand. Without preamble he told me that I appeared to have developed a substantial lung cancer. That there was a growth was not open to question, but there was a very, very small chance that it could be of benign fungal origin. He would put me on a massive antibiotic regime for ten days, re-X-ray and then make a final diagnosis. Hedda and I spent a tense and unhappy ten days before the inevitable result. After a straightforward consultation with surgeon Rob Girdwood, I was immediately checked into Milpark Hospital for a series of rather unpleasant preliminary tests to ascertain whether and whence the cancer had spread and how virulent a biopsy would show it to be.

I have no prior experience to draw on, and do not feel the need to discuss retrospectively the hospital experience. The mind has its own blessed opiates. I recall today little of the horror except for flashbacks, not all of them unpleasant. The first is the usually expressionless Girdwood face transformed by a grin, with the words – “I’ve good news for you, it’s operable!” The long lonely night before the operation, after an uncomfortable personally inflicted chest-shave and a malodorous antiseptic bath. Hedda of course could not stay. She had three children at home ages 10 – 13 – 16; Mark was at Yale. I still do not clearly know what they knew because Hedda had – and has – an almost superstitious horror of talking about the disease.

I do recall that night. I doubt if there is anything else that clears and concentrates the mind like the knowledge that you are hours from an operation that will quite probably prove terminal either on the operating table or soon thereafter. The final agonies of my brother, stricken by the same disease and for the same reason, were very clear. I had no illusions or false hopes, and as should be evident by now, no use for prayer. I was instead overtaken by an acceptance that there was nothing that I could personally do to change things, that I was in good hands, and to accept whatever hand was dealt me. I had written a note to my sons to be opened if I did not survive, telling them that I loved them and that I was sad not to be able to watch them grow; and that they should care well for their remarkable mother. The note is still locked in a London security box and they will see it in due course.

At such a time the past of course does a kaleidoscope run through the mind – joys, pleasures, regrets and regrets and regrets and regrets. Regrets that old priorities, in the night's clear sight, had been so skewed, and a determination to rectify that skewed order if I survived.

Sleep came quite early (was there a pill?) followed by the early wake-up call, the injection, oblivion, and the wakening to the turmoil and noise and deliberate callousness of the recovery unit. Then the days of acute discomfort and of waiting for the most important news of one's life – had "it" been contained; had "it" spread; did "it" need ongoing treatment; what was the prognosis? This is the period of maximum anxiety, of anxious eavesdropping of nurses' conversations; of waiting anxiously for the surgeon's evening visit; of acute physical discomfort to partner the mental turmoil; of the daily battle with the unyielding physiotherapist. None of this will be strange to anyone who has undergone a serious operation. All of it was strange and frightening to me.

Finally, the word came, and it was miraculous. A large fist-sized growth had been removed; two of the three lobes of my right lung had been excised; the cancer was certainly malignant, but not of a rapidly-developing kind; there was no sign whatsoever of it having spread; no further treatment, either chemotherapy or radiotherapy, was indicated at that stage, and hopefully never. I could relax, recover, go home in a week or so, and look forward to a normal life within a couple of months.

As though in farewell, a Salvation Army band had decided to play outside my window on my last hospital Sunday. Their zeal far outstripped their musical abilities!

I finally was slowly and carefully driven home by Hedda. Every minor bump hurt, but almost every discomfort was eclipsed by the joy of soft, cool sheets in my own bedroom, with my wife and children.

All of that is my side of the story. I know little of Hedda's and the children's side. Superficially, and to me, Hedda was magnificent, loving, caring, cheerful. I know that it took a superhuman effort to keep up this face for children and friends. I do not know how the children fared in this period. I must ask them. They knew of course that my illness was serious. Did they know clearly or instinctively how serious? Perhaps they will tell me when they read this.

The six to nine months following the operation were beset with concerns that in my case were fortunately without cause. Every pain and ache is a potential symptom of an undetected spread. A leg pain is bone-cancer; a discoloured toe-nail spells potential disaster; a mild head-ache is definitely a brain tumour. A temporary hypochondriac – with good reason – has been created!

A second thought is that no-one in similar circumstances should give up hope. My survival and ability to lead a perfectly natural and active life is not unique.

When I had fully recovered, I felt the need to do something that I still cannot explain. I went to Shul on a Saturday morning, asked to be called to the Torah, and *benched gamal*. I thanked the Lord, in whom I certainly do not believe, for my deliverance. Some insurance for the future? Some deeply ingrained vestige of *shtetl* superstition? Some desire to do something that I knew would have pleased my father? On balance, that was probably it.

And longer term? I think back on those few weeks quite often. I again re-assemble the old priorities. I remind myself of what is important. Finally I am sure that whilst physically I am 40 per cent short of lung capacity, I am otherwise as well as I have ever been. An annual check confirms this. I am cured and even insurable!