

Childhood



I AM NOT SURE of how old I was when I first became conscious of my environment. I was probably about four. There was a total pervasiveness and embrace of Jewishness. My two earliest recollections, which are very clear in my mind, are the morning prayer which Morris recited over me in my cot, and being told by Morris, whilst sitting on his lap when he was driving (there was little traffic in 1930!), not to blow the hooter because we were Jewish and must not draw attention to ourselves. The effect of these two incidents is also clear in my memory – an awareness of Jewishness and the way that it is regarded by others, and an instinctive rejection of prayer, superstition and religion. I may be remembering with hindsight, but I truly believe that even at that age I could not say a heartfelt prayer, and that I have in truth never uttered a sincere prayer. I suppose that this makes me a hypocrite because I have participated in all of the superstitions and rituals of religious Judaism whilst being at best an agnostic, and very probably an atheist. My deeply felt Jewishness is not religious, but interest and pride in its long history, ritual, song and culture. This is probably all part of the instinctive rejection that I always have had of the occult, of spiritualism, mysticism, the paranormal, astrology, homeopathy and related nonsense. My answer to the inevitable dinner-party question “What star are you” is – “faeces!”.

Jewishness was one major aspect of childhood. The other was my stutter. It probably originated after a desperate bout of diphtheria at the age of three from which I recovered, much weakened and more than usually prey to a possible predilection to speech problems. I am convinced that, probably on an underlay of a neurological predisposition, the stuttering was diagnosogenic – it was not there until it was diagnosed. It was perhaps unfortunate for me that I grew up in a family environment peopled by relatives who were unusually conscious of speech – Jocelyn was embracing elocution and drama, Aunt Anne was becoming a noted actress and theatrical director, Ruby was acting in stage shows, and the family generally was probably sub-consciously trying to escape Morris’ heavy accent.

Every small child has speech hesitations and repeats words. I believe that these were heightened by my weakened condition after my illness. I imagine that at some stage a sibling or a relative wondered aloud whether "Dovidol" was developing a stutter. Once the child links adult concern, however well hidden, to speech hesitation, you have a classic stuttrer. Link this to well-meaning "elocution" lessons and it is firmly imprinted forever. I can recall "Miss Joy Elvey's Elocution Studio" in which I was stood before a mirror for 30 minutes at a time repeating the B's and P's and D's and G's which were (and still are) my nemesis.

This was followed by sessions of a similar nature with Elizabeth Sneddon (subsequently a revered Professor of English Literature). At the time the understanding and psychology and treatment of speech problems were in their infancy. There is still no certainty and still much debate on origins and therapy, but what is very clear is that the treatment that I and others received was the diametric opposite to what is universally accepted today as the proper approach.

I shall not labour this subject as the depressing influence of stuttering on the lives of sufferers is well known. Suffice it to say that it changed my life as a child, it blighted my actions as a teenager, and it altered my approach as an adult. The agony of waiting to be called on to say my name in class, the terror of having to approach the old-fashioned telephone to ask "operator" for a number, the anxious calculation in advance of entering a discussion, the horror of preparing for a public speech, are certainly not unique to me. What is important perhaps is to understand how it changed my attitudes, personality, and professional life. At primary school I was somewhat gregarious, in my early teens normal approaches to girls were excruciating and usually avoided; in adulthood I avoided public exposure, but developed a carapace of jaunty unconcern which was wholly false. Any intelligent stuttrer will confirm that the fear and its influence never leave you, but that you learn to live with it, joke about it, and indeed use it as a tool. That it affects your life, as presumably does any physical or psychological defect, there is absolutely no doubt. I have no idea who and what I would have been without it. Probably not a forester (which perhaps appeared to a schoolboy's injured psyche to be a romantic, rather anti-social occupation), probably a lawyer. In later life perhaps a politician. I have always felt that I could have been a rabble-rouser! Written speeches trip off my pen! I have of course some theoretical regrets and much curiosity about what might have been, but we all are what circumstances have made us, moulded in part by whatever strengths and desires we have in ourselves. I have no real regrets – just an occasional wistful backward glance at possible lost opportunities, both

social and otherwise.

Back to my childhood: It was circumscribed and enriched by two major factors – family and Jewishness; of secondary importance at that stage was stuttering.

It was also enlarged by the beginnings of an understanding of the Africa that surrounded me, a world that was so completely different to the closed and inward-looking Jewish community which paid little heed to anything around it that was not of direct importance or threat. Durban was then very much an East Coast African town, as yet untroubled by legalised apartheid. There were of course colour strata, as there had always been, but relationships were relaxed, with traces of the “Sahib” mentality of the Raj.

I revelled in the strolling Zulu entertainers and praise-singers; in the visits of the Indian poultry traders (there was a chicken-run in every Jewish back-yard); in the dexterous twist of a basket atop a long bamboo pole retrieving wild mangoes and avocados from our garden trees, sold to the Hindu collector for a few pence; in the somewhat mysterious, musty and aromatic interiors of Muslim-owned shops. There were of course racial tensions, but I was blissfully unaware of them. For a child – and particularly a white child – Durban was an exotic paradise.

My school career began at Gordon Road Girls School, but I was soon moved to “Miss McAlpine’s Nursery School” in Gordon Road, a short walk from our house. I have little recollection of it, except that it was there that I met Rupert Waite, the son of Afrikaans parents (a railwayman and boarding-house owner) who became my closest friend and my first partial escape from the environment that was to become, for me, increasingly restrictive. I have little doubt that his parents were as alarmed at the friendship as were mine.

In due and proper course I enrolled at the Durban Preparatory Boys High School in Standard I. The school was an easy half-mile walk from our home and a natural school start for most of the Jewish community. I was small, bespectacled (I acquired them at age eight), obedient and hard-working. I soon discovered that I was academically clever and throughout my primary school career headed the “A” class in each standard. This of course endeared me to dotting parents and to Uncle Sol, who had fathered two daughters and was becoming concerned about an heir for the now very large and successful Moshal Gevisser business. I believe that he, at about this time, suggested to my parents that he should formally adopt me! This must have been the only time that he was categorically refused by his normally totally acquiescent sister and brother-in-law.

I fear that I was also teacher’s pet, except for the sports masters. As

Natal was (and is) very British; sports – rugby, cricket, athletics – were very important and compulsory. I did not fare well at any of them, was never able to persuade myself to tackle an opponent, or to hit or catch a cricket ball, other than by accident. Antony's and John's genes remain a mystery.

I seemed to do well in all subjects, but English and History were, from the beginning, a delight, as was Latin. Whilst at this level I had no difficulty with elementary mathematics, the seeds of future trauma in this discipline were beginning to sprout. I enjoyed singing classes with "Miss Jackson" whom I still fondly remember, as I do rather ridiculous songs like –

"Bobby Shafto went to sea, silver buckles at
his knee"

and

"Caesar looked over his armies and spoke to
his legions three.

Wash your hair, and dress with care and mind
your step on the left wing there!

And keep yourself in good order, order!"

They were six happy and successful years with no major problems or traumas, except for one incident in my final year that still gives me strange retrospective grief. The top academic pupil was always made a prefect. I was overlooked, because of a rowdy end of year celebration in the classroom which indicated "immaturity" (at age eleven!) to the Headmaster. It still hurts and rankles! I am also still retrospectively ashamed at having given a ridiculous LBW decision in a cricket match in which I was a very ignorant umpire, because of the size and aggressiveness of the bowler!

"Prep," as the school was known, had about four hundred pupils, of whom about twenty five were Jewish. I recall absolutely no anti-semitism although the fact that we were different was underlined by our having to stand together in a line away from the school hall every morning when the school was at morning prayer. We were then led in for the daily announcements and instructions. Apart from Rupert Waite and a new chum, Henry Smith, my school friends were Jewish – Gerald Hackner, Percy Cohen, Leon Lewis, Harold Bronstein. An early recollection of a classic Jewish trauma had to do with a sad, unkempt, fat boy whose clothes and person were dirty and unwashed. He was regularly sent home in tears to clean himself up. I kept away from him and joined in the cruel chorus of schoolboy harassment. I was ashamed of his being Jewish, of

standing with him in the morning line-up. I subsequently discovered that his father was a pawnbroker, who abused his mother who had left him, and that he was given no money and no attention and was left to fend for himself. He left school soon after, to my then relief. He must have been a desperately unhappy boy, crying out for friendship. I often wonder what happened to him.

Another difference for the Jewish boys was that instead of sports or friends, or play, *cheder* awaited us for three long afternoons each week until Barmitzvah. In retrospect, an inhuman imposition; at the time an unquestioned part of our lives.

The *cheder* was owned and operated by David Harris, a rather saintly man with snow-white hair and goatee, and rather malevolently presided over by his wife, Sarah. It was located mid-way between school and home which gave me even less opportunity than the others to skip an afternoon.

Cheder was held in the Harris dining room. The scene was probably a somewhat refined duplicate of a *shtetl cheder*. Reb Harris sat at the head of the table, usually sipping a glass of Russian tea. Round the table, elbow to elbow, were a mixed age crew of reluctant scholars of six to thirteen years. It was *de rigueur* to shout one's lessons as loudly as possible. Getting individual attention at Reb Harris' right and left hands, were the aspirant Barmitzvah boys loudly learning and reciting the cadences of their *Haftorah* and *Maftir* portions. Elbowing their way in was an eager beaver or two wanting his *targum* (translation) checked. The remainder were reading from dog-eared books in which each page was divided into two columns. On the right was a line of Hebrew from the Old Testament; on the left a very unimaginative translation. The "scholars" shouted out the Hebrew paragraph, and then the English translation. This was supposedly structured to provide a knowledge of the Holy Books, a literacy in Hebrew, and a working ability to translate from the one to the other.

I cannot speak for my fellow scholars, but I have little doubt that at the end of the long years of *cheder* their knowledge of Hebrew was an excellent fluency, totally without understanding. To this day, I read Hebrew well, but the meaning of all but a few key words is zero. The object of *cheder* was apparently to be able to show to one's parents and to the congregation, an ability to read, and that was enough. There was no discussion of religion, of the meaning of the festivals, of Judaism. I weep for those wasted years when I could have easily become fluent in any language of my choice. Of course, there was then no question of becoming fluent in Hebrew. We learnt the biblical, classical Hebrew

which it was still blasphemous to speak as vernacular. My Hebrew accent is that of the Yeshiva and not of modern Israel.

As I had a decent alto voice and was able to read Hebrew, I was an early candidate for the shul choir in which I spent a number of years, singing on Friday nights, Saturday mornings and all the festivals. It was, for someone of my age and in that community, an honour. We were part of an elite club – and were paid too! A pittance perhaps (I recall thirty shillings per month), but a very welcome addition to pocket money.

It was as well that the choir master never discovered that I could not hold a melody or harmonize, and I fluctuated between the tenor key on my left and the more natural alto on my right. I could however perform adequately on my own, and on some occasions took the role of junior *Chazan* for the children's *shabbos* service. Inside of me however there was a growing restiveness with the superstitions and rituals and trappings of religion. I began to rebel secretly. *Kashrut* outside the home became increasingly unimportant. Forbidden foods during Pesach no longer had the effect of making me physically ill in revulsion.

I remained of course a regular shul-goer. That was inescapable. It was also attractive because Grandpa Moshal, who behind the facade of orthodoxy was no angel and “knew a thing or two”, enticed me by surreptitiously palming a half-crown into my hand as we said the ritual “good *shabbos*” or “good *Yomtov*”.

The St. Andrews Street Shul is alas no longer. In a child's memory, it was large and imposing. In reality it was a relatively small, classic shul structure seating perhaps 400 worshippers, the ladies of course being segregated upstairs, but as we were an “advanced” congregation, at least not hidden behind a grille.

Associated with the religious side of the community was the active Zionist movement which was reaching heights of fervour in the years before the war, fanned by reports of events in Germany, and the beginnings of a small trickle of European refugees.

I was automatically enrolled in the *Habonim* movement – the uniformed youth movement that was a Jewish version of the Boy Scouts, heavily overlaid with Zionist and socialist politics. I collected my uniform, swore to be a good Jew dedicated to the resurrection of Eretz Israel, went to one Sunday morning meeting, never to return – much to the disquiet of Ruby, who, inevitably, was a *madrigah* or leader.

I have often tried to analyse my drift away from institutional Judaism which began at such an early age. Part of it was surely a generational thing, a small revolt against my parents' generation who were still unreconstructed shtetl-dwellers. My generation had more reason than most to embark

upon generational revolt. Part of it was a growing instinctive distrust of all superstition and religious mumbo-jumbo. Part of it was a flight from uniformity. Finally, part of it was the beginnings of the realisation that there was a world beyond that of the Jewish community. It was the beginning of a lifelong struggle, an inner debate between a deep pride in my Jewish ancestry and a rejection of its medievalism; between a dislike of uniformity and a desire to join the fight; and initially embracing of the ideal of a Jewish State and now a deep feeling of shame when I think of the treatment of Palestinian and Israeli Arabs. I still make my monthly donation to the IUA, but every month resolve to cancel it!

I must return to a Jewish childhood in the Durban of the 1930's. Home life was warm, happy, embracing, peopled by relatives, parents' friends, Jewish school friends who came to visit, sometimes for weekends, Zulu servants, and a white nanny who was changed with some regularity but somehow remained generically the same. It was peopled also by older sisters and a brother and their friends and pupils. Friday nights were sacrosanct family evenings. No-one left the home, unless it was one of the sisters with a suitor, (Jewish of course) until *after* supper. Festivals were celebrated at length. Family *mitzvahs* came at frequent intervals. Visits to 249 Avondale Road, the large house of Granny and Zeisi (Grandpa) were frequent and enjoyed. As a child I went with Janie and Morris to *Yomtavim*. Passover *seder* nights were a delight with a table of thirty to forty of family and friends, presided over by Zeisi and Morris, reclining ritually on white-draped sofas. For many years I was the youngest and gloried in the recitation of the ritual four questions. I can still recall my childish chagrin when I was replaced by a young Moshal cousin! These were lovely, laughter-filled evenings, enriched by the age-old chants and traditions which were faithfully reproduced by those in whose bones was the *shtetl* memory. Uncle Barney provided the intellectual input with erudite but light explanations of the service. The search for the hidden *Afikomen* by all of the many children was riotous with detailed diversions (usually very transparent) being planned to distract Morris and Zeisi, the guardians. Those evenings have never been reproduced and I am filled with nostalgia for them and a sadness that this is part of the Jewish heritage which we have not been able to give to our sons. It is sad too that they never knew either of their grandfathers. My maternal grandparents were certainly a major early influence and still a clear memory. Grandfather Jacob a small man, always immaculately dressed, usually in a cream linen suit and bowtie with a fund of Jewish stories and lore (and a quick temper!), and Granny *Sheva*, kind and long-suffering, probably a victim of the then unmentionable cancer, whose



Jacob (Zeisi) Moshal, circa 1933

every exhalation was accompanied by the “oi” sound!

There were a succession of birthday parties – Shirley Moshal, Leon Lewis, Gerald Hackner, Percy Cohen. Activities at these varied from imported clowns and conjurers to self-produced concerts (which must have been excruciating for all the adults except the parents of each performer) and “athletic” meetings. I couldn’t have shone at any of these – a stutterer is not a good performer of plays, and I was not particularly dexterous and certainly not athletic.

One of my cousins, and friend worth noting, was Aaron Klug, now Sir Aaron, the Nobel laureate in molecular biology and genetics. His family – Lazar, Sarah, her sister Rose, their two sons Aaron and Benny – were brought out as a family by Morris and Issy in a prescient move in 1932. Aaron was then six years old. None of the family could speak anything other than Yiddish. Lazar was a kosher butcher, hard-working, strictly religious, and determined to make a life for himself and his family. He opened a shop, with his cousins’ help, and slowly climbed up the ladder, ending his working life with a good house, well-educated children, and a small block of flats.

Benny and Aaron, both very bright, helped their father in his shop from 5 a.m. until school-time. At school (Durban High) they rapidly made a name for themselves, the language not being a burden on their

formidable intellects. Whilst both were exceptional, Aaron was soon identified as genius material. He matriculated at 14 (all A's), received a B.Sc. magna cum laude at 17 from Wits, and left for greater things first at the University of Cape Town and then in the U.K. A happy memory is a weekend with Aaron at our home, where the future Nobel prize-winner blew both of us up. We were making hydrogen in my chemistry set. It was bubbling through water at the delivery end. Aaron lit a match to check it!

I must leap far into the future. We have kept in touch with Aaron, and in September of 2005 he invited Hedda and me to be his guests at a Presidential award ceremony in Pretoria, where he received South Africa's highest honour in memorable surroundings. I asked him, flippantly, what recognition there had been from Lithuania. To my happy surprise he said that on that day – September 22nd – a bronze bust of himself was being erected in a small Holocaust museum in Pozelvi (Zelva) primary school. He had had to choose between his birthplace and Pretoria.

Primary school days came to an end with the traditional *barmitzvah*, a top mark in the Provincial Standard VI examinations, and a Provincial bursary to Durban High School. I was a much fêted, congratulated, timorous, bespectacled, undersized little Jewish boy, chafing at family and communal restrictions and mores for reasons that I did not even begin to understand. It was 1939, on the cusp of major changes – the advent of puberty, the war, brother Leslie a soldier at 18, the move to High School, long pants and a straw basher, a world where rigidity was beginning to flex – and the delights of cigarettes, of an occasional alcoholic drink, of an awakening interest in girls.

Bathsheva Moshal, circa 1933





*The Moshal Family, Durban circa 1940. Standing, from left: Tilly, Max, Zelda, Sarah, Sol, Gretchen, Ida, Barney, Ann, Harold
Seated: Morris, Janie, Jacob (Zeisi), Budge, Louis. Front: David and Leslie*