



# Memories of a Jewish Boyhood

*Yiddish sounds, Carlton sights*

BY SAM LIPSKI

THE earliest memories are incongruous . . . the ABC News at seven o'clock and the face of King George VI. What have they to do with my Jewish boyhood? Listening to the news was as much a ritual as the lighting of the candles on the Sabbath Eve. For the news told us how the war was going. To be more exact, the news told us if the Allies were coming close to defeating the Nazis. And if that happened soon enough; there was the hope, illogical and remote, that the families my parents and their neighbors had left behind in Europe would still be alive.

On summer nights the Jews of Drummond Street, Carlton, would sit outside in the deckchairs they had brought from Biyalestock and Lodz, from Czenstechow and Lublin, and talk about the war. It overshadowed all.

The sounds of earliest Jewish boyhood were mainly Yiddish sounds. I spoke Yiddish before I learnt English and although both my parents' and their friends could speak Polish they were not keen to do so. Polish was the language of a country which held generally unpleasant Memories for them. If the Sounds were Yiddish, then the sights were unmistakably Australian. The map of my world, at the age of six, was bounded by Lee Street at one end, where attended school, and Princess Street at the other, where I went to get bread and onion

rolls — the unforgettable *plezlacl* — from Berland's the baker. Fishers kosher restaurant was on the corner a Lee Street and Rathdown Street and Mr Fishel, stoop-shouldered and moustached like the faded photograph of an unknown French writer he kept in his office, could be, seen regularly on my way to school carrying the innumerable empty crates of soda-water bottles out into the lane at the back of his restaurant.

The stretch of Drummond Street between Lee Street and Princess Street was really *North* Carlton; the houses were a mixture of brick terraces, cottages tightly buttressed against one another and an occasional house with a garden. Down the centre of the street ran the nature strip of lawn — playground and cricket-pitch for me and my friends and an isle of nostalgia for my parents and theirs. This is where they sat and tried hard to make sense of what was happening as much to themselves as to those Jews who were being liquidated in Europe.

The Jews of Drummond Street were nearly all from lower-middle class unprofessional backgrounds; most of them lived in a row of brick cottages on one side of Drummond Street called the *kusharim* or the *cazarmes* — both words meaning "the barracks", a term which was certainly appropriate. Most of the *cazarmes* dwellers began their working life in

Australia as hawkers, as pressers, or as-stall-holders in the Victoria Market.

I cannot recall the specifics of the sadness which many of these Jews must have felt when they knew that their families had been lost — but I do recall the sense of helplessness which they expressed, especially on those summer nights as clusters of children rushed about, cooling off by jumping through the sprinklers while their fathers sat in singlets and their mothers with bowls of fruit in their laps.

The war — almost entirely the war in Europe — is inescapable therefore as a memory and for the way it conditioned so much of my earliest Jewish awareness. There was, however, a humorous side to the discussions. All were master tacticians, all had their own ideas of when and where the Allies should start the "second" front". My father took it for granted that I was interested in the details of D-Day and the Russian advance and at the age of six I was addressed as an adult on these subjects. My father, who, by then was in his fifties, wits particularly elated one morning when he woke me to exult — "The Allies have taken Paris. At last." Even a six-year-old boy had to be woken with news of that importance.

The news is tied to my memory of boyhood Jewishness in another way. As soon as the broadcast was over at

7.15 my father would take out a Hebrew primer and teach me to read.

Learning to read Hebrew, with the strange letters of the alphabet which spilled across the page back to front to English, was not a chore but a special treat. It was like playing with a puzzle and besides it was a secret game that I alone among my friends could play. For although there were a number of Jewish families among our closest neighbors, none had children my age and my immediate friends were then all from school or the neighborhood.

My learning to read Hebrew also explains the memory of more King George VI. As I learnt to read more fluently I was expected to begin saying prayers — the *brief Modeh Ani* in rising and the *Kriyat Shmah* before retiring. In translating both of these prayers for me my father had to answer my first barrage of questions about the nature of God. For until the age of six I had not prayed. Jews who follow the Orthodox rituals pray only in Hebrew, formally at least. God, therefore, was only a word to me until I found myself thanking him every morning in Hebrew for “having returned my soul to me with loving kindness”. My father was uncompromisingly strict in his refusal to give God any human attributes or shape and tried to answer my questions by the citing of Talmudic authorities. It was not much help to me because all I wanted to know was what God looked like.

### *Stones' School*

BUT, as my father explained, not even Moses could look upon God's face and hope to stay alive. My solution to the Mystery was simple. I decided that God looked just like King George IV — a head like on the penny, no arms and no body but a head in the clouds.

When I had learned to read it was time to go to *cheder* — Hebrew school, My first *cheder* was “Stones' School” in Pitt Street, Carlton next to the *Chevra Kadisha*, the Jewish funeral parlors. Called “Stones' Shool” because it was founded and kept alive by the remarkable Melbourne family of Stone brothers, this was a small synagogue which flourished for two generations before it began to decline when suburban migration overtook it some five or six years ago.

But in 1945 it was a thriving centre. It was open daily for prayers as well as on the Sabbath and the holy days. There were two Hebrew classes daily from Sunday to Thursday. During the week we would come after school — ten of ‘us in the “small boys”” class and half a dozen in the “older boys” — to learn the Bible in Hebrew, how to translate the prayers and something about Jewish history and customs. Lessons lasted for an hour and a half in what was not really a school but the front pews of the synagogue. With a lectern in front of him our teacher struggled with us, and a struggle it was. A round waddler of a man with a small black skull-cap which used to slide precariously all over his nearly bald head, he was not up to the formidable task of introducing us to the finer points of Genesis, our main study. His English was bad and, with the cruelty of childhood, we made him feel that it was far worse. In any case he did not have his heart in it after a day of trying to make his living at a clothing stall in the Victoria Market and slaughtering chickens at the kosher butchers.

He was short on temper and shorter still on understanding of children. We baited him mercilessly and, in a half-Yiddish half-English, his warnings would come spluttering forth, a score of times every lesson, “I'll gib you such a frusk in de face, you chooligan, di einer”.

My father felt that I was wasting my time and enrolled me in another afternoon school. Here at Bialik School, named after the great poet laureate of the modern Hebrew language revival, I found a new world. The teachers were either kindly ladies or pleasant young men and instead of going every night after school we came only twice a week and Sunday mornings. And there were parties; parties to celebrate the festivals, parties every Sabbath morning after the service, parties before the summer holidays and parties afterwards, all replete with butter-cake, lemonade -and honey biscuits.

I had to change my traditional Ashkenazi (Western) pronunciation of Hebrew to the modern Sephardi (Eastern) pronunciation and I had to call teachers by their Hebrew titles. Simple Hebrew conversation was encouraged and songs were taught. Much time was spent preparing

concerts and pageants at which we would dress in white smocks with baskets of fruit on our shoulders. It was one long game designed to encourage some attachment to the new centre of Jewish life in Palestine, but it was only rarely educational in my father's sense. But he was an enthusiastic Zionist. So it took him a year to discover that while I was enjoying myself immensely I was not really learning very much.

To my father “learning” meant the Bible with its commentaries and eventually the encyclopaedic Talmud — the exposition of Jewish lore and law. So I went to my third Hebrew school, this time in Rathdown Street, Carlton, the - “Hasoolah”, which means Enlightenment. More commonly we knew it as the “Tummo” — short for Talmud Torah. Here the atmosphere was much more like that of Stones' — orthodox; Ashkenazi, East-European rather than the modern Hebrew flavor of Bialik School. But there were many more pupils — 130 when I started at the age of eight.

In the early months I found myself in a class which, was even more disorganised than that of the hapless fat man at Stones'. Our teacher was a young lady, a daughter of one of Melbourne's leading Orthodox families, who was pleasant enough but found it difficult to maintain even the remotest semblance of order for very long despite frequent and exasperated recourse to a ruler across the backside.

To make matters worse, and at one stage almost chaotic, our teacher was being courted by another teacher, an earnest young gentleman who would send her note's during class, to our endless glee and to the blushing teacher's discomfiture. In the circumstances it was surprising that we learnt anything at all. But we did and I think this was largely due to the “Tummo” headmaster, Rabbi Silver. He was able to put the fear of God into us, literally. Some years later I was to study the Talmud with him and find him one of the best pedagogues and most charming men I have ever known. But in the junior classes he was feared. Appearing when our lady, of the furtive notes was in her greatest moment of distress he would silence the class with a whack of his stick on the door. He hardly ever used the stick on us but ran

the school with the threat hanging over all.

For the boys at the school the most feared question from Rabbi Silver was, "Are you wearing your *tsitsis*?" Orthodox Jews are required to wear a small four-corner undergarment with tasselled fringes known as *tsitsis*, and Rabbi Silver made this one of his special projects. The traditional answer for not wearing the *isitsis* (because it was hot, or cumbersome, or because we had forgotten) was "My mother's washing them". This sort of excuse never satisfied Rabbi Silver. With great determination he would look hard at us and ask "And where is your spare pair?"

I recall only one pupil at the school ever standing up to Rabbi Silver. It happened after a number of us had been called out in front of the class to explain why we had been singing in the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation's choir. Rabbi Silver was concerned on two counts. He knew that all of us who were singing lived a long way from the synagogue and that therefore we would have to break the Sabbath and travel to get there. He also knew that we did not go to pray but only to sing when required and to play hand-cricket for the rest of the time.

### *A dissenting choirboy*

So he insisted that we should stop travelling to East Melbourne and start attending the Sabbath services at the Hebrew school conducted by him and his eventual successor, Rabbi Reidzki. Most of us were too frightened to do anything but say we would do what he wanted. But the one dissenting voice came from a choirboy who said that he was still going to continue to travel to the choir. There was an awful silence as Rabbi Silver demanded, "Tell me 'why'". "Because" said the rebel, "I pay two pence for my fares to get there and I get two-and-six for singing each week, Two-and-six for twopence — I think it's worth it." Rabbi Silver was speechless. If he reads this his only consolation might be that the rebel took his non-conformism as far as becoming an active worker for the, anti-fluoride cause.

The dominating figure at East Melbourne Synagogue in the forties was the great Chazan Rechter, a cantor of international repute. East Melbourne was my father's "special

synagogue" where he went on the high holy days — "to hear Rechter".

We came from Carlton which was relatively close. But others came from all over Melbourne to hear Reater. In the tradition of the great cantors of Eastern Europe he had a powerful tenor voice and the manner to go with it. On the eve of the Day of Atonement, when the synagogue would be crowded for the Kol Nidre service, he would wait until the aisles were so blocked that he could barely pass. Then he would enter dramatically from the rear of the synagogue, pushing his way through, his voice ringing, out with the first prayers before he had even reached the altar. When every other synagogue would finish the Kol Nidre prayers by 8.30 in the evening, East Melbourne would rarely be through until 9.30. The melodies and tunes of Eastern Europe's Judaism, together with its food; were, and still are, the most lasting memories for many Jews who no longer expressed their Jewishness in any other way. Rechter was a living reminder of what they could only hear on scratchy recordings: Kussevitsky, Yossele Rosenblatt; Sarota and the other great names of the cantorial pantheon.

In much the same way as the war had determined much of the talk about and around the Jews of my early boyhood, the emergence of Israel affected much of my later childhood, I joined *Habonim*, the first of the Zionist youth movements to be established in Australia.

It was an exciting time to join such a movement. At every meeting there was passionate talk about the events in Palestine, about the coming of independence and about the realisation of historic dreams. It was quite overwhelming for a boy of nine and I took it all terribly seriously, as did my friends. Saturday afternoon when we would meet in a crumbling old factory turned into clubrooms at the top of Drummond Street, became the focal point of the week. The blue uniform with its dark blue scarf was the one item of clothing I cared for through the week and the songs of the Zionist pioneers crowded out all others.

Added to this fervor was that which my father expressed by his long lectures after the daily news. One of the first settlers of Tel Aviv in the period immediately after the First World War, he saw the coming of a

Jewish State in a religious way. For him it was the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. Nevertheless he was a strong supporter of the "terrorist" liberation movement because, as he said, "God needs sleep sometimes". The word "terrorist" angered him and he dismissed the ideas of "self-restraint" I brought home from my youth movement which was ideologically aligned with Ben Gurion's political party in Israel — the Mapai, 'opponents of the "terrorists"'. In later years I was to join a Zionist youth movement which was fundamentally religious: Habonim was irreligious (rather than anti-religious although its leadership then included some outspoken Marxists). But in my boyhood Habonim was my first love.

In the year before my bar-mitzvah the ceremony of confirmation at the age of thirteen which introduces the Jewish boy into the company of adults and makes him liable for his own sins in the religious sense, a number of things happened which changed much of the previous pattern of my Jewish boyhood. They happened as coincidences which make them stand out even more.

### *Carlton Synagogue*

THE major change was that we shifted house from Drummond Street to Palmerston Street, two doors away from the Carlton Synagogue. It was a major change because of the idiosyncratic nature of my father's attachment to Orthodox Judaism. He came from a devoutly Chassidic family in Warsaw which prided itself on its *yichuss* — its family tree. On both sides there were famous rabbis and on my grandmother's side of the tree he was a direct descendant of the great Rabbi Joseph Karo, the medieval author of the Shulchan Aruch, the basic text of Jewish religious law.

My grandmother even had a family tree which traced us all back to King David. This my father used to say good-humoredly thereby ensured that the Messiah would come from our family or one of the 100,000 or so other Jewish families in Warsaw whose mothers had family trees showing "quite clearly" their descent from the House of David.

Yet although my father had had a strong Orthodox education, even to the point of completing the required

amount of study for the rabinate by the time he settled in Australia, he was not strictly Orthodox in any of the more important matters. He did not observe the Sabbath, going instead to Victoria Market to buy fruit and vegetables for the week; he did not observe the dietary laws strictly, allowing my mother to mix milk and meat dishes together; he did not pray regularly except on the holy days when he did not carry on his work as a painter and carpenter. On the other hand he did insist on candle being lit in the house every Friday night, he did bless the wine and sit down to a special meal, he doggedly if inconsistently demanded that I should be observant even if he was not, and he emphasised the importance of Jewish learning above all else.

When we shifted to the house two doors away from a synagogue he changed his whole way of life overnight, literally. On the very first night in the new house there came a telegram from Jerusalem telling us of my grandfather's death at the age of 94. It was as if that had been a long awaited sign. From that day onwards the Sabbath in our house was observed strictly, the dietary laws were kept, and my father attended synagogue three times every day to pray. In fact his whole life began to revolve around the synagogue. At weddings he was an official witness, at morning prayers he would often act as cantor, in his reading he began to turn once more to the classic Talmudic literature which had not studied for 40 years, and a wish expressed in my grandfather's will that if 'they observed nothing else his children should hold the Sabbath Day sacred had made a deep impression on him.

At this time also I began to study the special readings from the Bible which I would chant in the synagogue on the day of my bar-mitzvah. My teacher was the late Leon Gurewicz. One of his proudest possessions was a long poem of praise to his culinary skills by A. D Hope. Outside a few friends of his family, however, he was less well-known for his great fund of Jewish learning and his delight in the aesthetic qualities of the Hebrew liturgy well sung in the synagogue. My study with him, which also meant talking to his father, came at the time when religion began to emerge as an everyday factor in my life.

The late Rabbi Gurewicz was very much a part of this life — at least on the Sabbath. Blind for much of his later years he would walk down Rathdown Street every Saturday morning on the arm of one of his sons, a straight-backed figure in an Edwardian coat with a wide brimmed black hat. His long, grey beard framed a face which always beamed with kindness.

In the late afternoon quiet of Saturdays, a quiet broken only by the dissonant shouts from the beery SP shop in the lane at the back of the synagogue, he would sit at the head of the traditional Shalosh Seudoth table — the table of the Sabbatical Third Meal — and softly tell his parables based on the Bible readings of the week. Then he would lead the singing of Psalm 23, which precedes the grace at that meal.

On my bar-mitzvah day, a hot January Saturday, it was Rabbi Gurewicz who farewelled my Jewish boyhood with his priestly blessing of "May the Lord bless you and keep you.