

# THEY MADE A JEW OF ME

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My first serious experience of anti-semitism was in my fourteenth year when I won a trade scholarship. The London County Council offered me a place at a cordwainer's technical college, which turned out to be an institute for shoe-making near an offal yard in Smithfield market. I was the only Jewish pupil and didn't last more than a term.

From the very first roll-call the headmaster improvised variations on my name. It became Litintott, Levypotsky, Levinskinoff, Litmuspaperoff and—on one hilarious public occasion—Lavatoryoffsky, but I didn't generalise from this experience. Getting a factory job and hanging on to it was tough enough in those days, and in the fur trade the enemy was more likely to be the Jewish boss or his foreman than the "goy" on the next bench.

I was then a boy Communist with a rather apocalyptic notion of political salvation.

The day of Mosley and his fascists arrived and a frightening change came over the East End. Snotty-nosed kids from the next street in Bethnal Green suddenly appeared buckled and booted in black uniforms, looking anything but juvenile as they tramped through the district shouting: "We gotta get rid of the Yids, the Yids! We gotta get rid of the Yids!" and bespoke-tailored fascists came from the suburbs to officer these eager troops.

Young Communists marched to meetings in red; Zionist youths went around in blue; Jewish ex-servicemen paraded in their war-medals. Sir Oswald Mosley made bodyguarded visits to his stronghold in Roman Road, Bethnal Green. His hot-eyed, rigid expression suggested that he derived from the slum streets and shabby onlookers an onanistic illusion of conquest.

He stood on a platform orating in a prissy upper-class English voice, sounding like a demented Bertie Wooster, but no one felt like laughing. His hatred penetrated to the marrow of my Jewish bones. There was something inevitable about it all; it was as if all my life I had been waiting for it to happen.

At about this time, I was abnormally sensitive over my appearance, having the notion that my nose was too long, my lips too thick and my walk flat-footed and ungainly. I tried to remember not to talk with my hands, but the moment I got excited they jumped out of my pockets and made un-British gestures. When I shoved them out of sight my tongue stumbled on the simplest phrases.

This self-contempt made me intolerant of the imperfections of other Jews that I had begun to recognise with sickening frequency. Every time a woman with a foreign accent made a scene on a bus, or two men argued loudly in Yiddish over a business deal, or a music-hall comedian got a few laughs by jamming a bowler-hat over his ears and retracting his neck into his shoulders, I was miserably ashamed.

I started to look at my surroundings in a different way, although all my life

had been spent in the same neighbourhood. Now the foreign names on shop fronts seemed grotesque and provocative; the Koshers signs and Yiddish lettering were embarrassing advertisements of alienation; there was too much huckstering in street-markets; the flies crawling over exposed meat and groceries were proof of ingrained backwardness and squalor.

Soon afterwards I became a Zionist of that extreme wing from which the Irgun and the Stern Gang eventually stemmed. Much had happened since those innocent days when I had taken it for granted that Englishmen were simply people born in England. Until the age of ten I had not seen a country lane, a field, or the sea. England's green and pleasant land was a green and pleasant conceit in a school poem.

Reality was the ghetto of East London, the only England I knew, the only place in the whole wide world to which I was truly native. And if I ever thought of it at all, what else was I but English, and what else was I but Jewish, and why should the one be inconsistent with the other? Well, Hitler and Mosley, and a good many others who would not go quite so far but agreed that "something should be done about the Jews," had changed all that.

After a time my circumstances im-

proved. I found a place to live in Finchley Road, had a regular job in the fur trade and settled down to try to write. Astrology and the occult fascinated me. The world tilted sharply towards war while I gravely cast its horoscope.

The coming of war was a kind of liberation for me. I travelled north to an army depot in Glasgow with a draft of conscripts from all parts of East London, young Cockneys leaving the smoke with reluctance. When the train left Euston a few of the Jews grouped themselves together, exchanging glances of recognition and commiseration.

There were other regional groupings,

for local patriotism used to be strong in the poor districts of London. Bermondsey boys eyed natives of Shoreditch with misgiving, Hoxton stared through Homerton as if X-raying his backbone. If there was anybody with a posh accent on the train he had the sense to keep his mouth shut.

On route to Crewe we began to uncongeal. When the train halted we raided the buffets for beer. In Newcastle ribaldry ran riot and the northern girls shrieked with delight at our coarse flatteries. We finally reached Glasgow as high-spirited and united as supporters of a cup-final football team. Once battle-dress was on and square-bashing began we were as alike as if hatched together from the same gigantic womb.

For my own part, this anonymity was convalescent. The army offered little hardship. For the first time I was eating three square meals a day and still feeling hungry. I got the first warm overcoat of my life, free boot repairs and laundry, a primitive sense of well-being. Without being a good soldier, I was skilful at tempering the rigours of military discipline and kept out of serious trouble.

My Jewish neuroses vanished as I learned to turn the occasional antisemitic remark against its perpetrator with nonchalant good humour. Friendships took no account of religion or race, anyway. I used to take my army pal, goy to the marrow, to free meals given by the Glasgow Jewish WVS where he was tacitly accepted as Private Cohen, and, after a few pints of beer, was prepared to prove it by showing his circumcision.

Good humour and cynicism were the things to cultivate and using your loaf to get privileges, free beer, leave-passes, sex. There was an unbelligerent war going on somewhere; if there were also rumours of cruelties practised upon civil populations in German-occupied territory little of it got into the newspapers, or we didn't think too much about it. Then came Dunkirk and the brutal awakening.

The term "final solution" was still unknown, and the idea that even the Nazis could be capable of planning the total extermination of the Jewish people would have been unthinkable in



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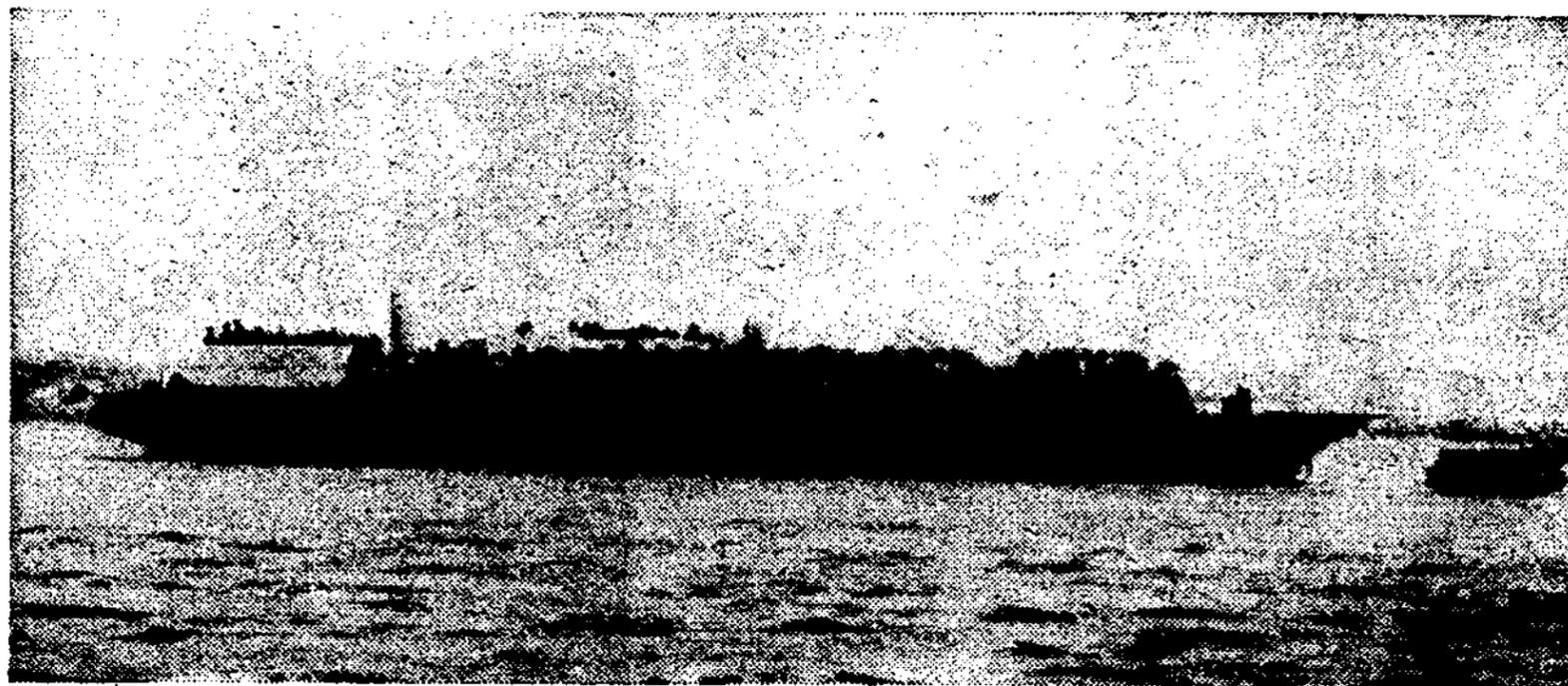


Old Montague Street, Whitechapel. From "London Souvenirs," by Geoffrey Fletcher. Allen and Unwin, £2.95

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The Struma

England, but the starvation and sadistic cruelties practised in Dachau, Buchenwald and other places were reported even in "peace-time."

After Dunkirk, when the war stopped being a sideshow and became a life-and-death struggle, the newspapers began to hint at unspeakable atrocities at special camps into which Europe's Jews were being herded. These unknown victims took on the features of my own family, of my mother, my young sister and my brothers, three of them soldiers like myself, four still schoolchildren.

Suddenly we were swept into intensive training—battle-courses, manoeuvres, exercises in coastal defence. The air war raged. I was sent to a transit camp for overseas posting. Kitted out in tropical gear, on the point of departure, I heard the appalling story of the refugee boat, the "Struma."

A small group of Jewish fugitives—men, women and children—had succeeded in escaping to the

Dalmatian coast and were smuggled aboard an old cargo boat. It must have seemed a miracle of deliverance. Miraculously, they survived a hazardous Mediterranean crossing and reached Turkey, hoping to travel overland to Palestine. But there was a legal obstacle. The British authorities refused entry certificates on the grounds that the quota allocated to Jewish immigrants was exhausted.

The fugitives then applied to the Turks for permission to stay in the country. This also was refused. They pleaded that the children, at least, should be permitted to stay, but again the answer was no. The "Struma" was ordered to leave port. Some distance out at sea, there was an explosion and it foundered. Only one survived.

The sinking of the "Struma" broke my heart. It blurred the frontiers of evil. Those stony British and Turkish officials who could send people to their death because their papers were not in order were Hitler's accomplices. They had refused even children the right to live because it would upset their book-keeping.

No doubt they had consulted with superiors. Coded messages had gone from Ankara to Whitehall. Senior bureaucrats must have found it tiresome to be bothered in the middle of a war by a group of refugees who inconveniently turned up demanding to be let into Palestine. Before they escaped from the Nazis they should have found out if there was room on the quota for them. Didn't these people know there was a war on?

If it were possible to point to one single episode as a decisive turning point in one's life, "Struma" would be that for me. Never again would I be able to think of myself as an English-

man, or face uncertainty about my identity. In the middle of this century any Jew in Europe was condemned as surely as if he was born with an incurable disease. Only the accident of geography, or astronomically lucky odds, determined his survival. And when the war was won, for me it was also lost six million times over.

This exclusive sense of injury lacks generosity, even imagination. It was some time before I was able to recognise that there was a similar, if lesser, depravity in the indiscriminate slaughter by mass bomber raids as in the selective killings by the Nazis, that both techniques derived from an increasing tendency on the part of people to regard other people as abstractions. But that is not my theme. I am concerned here with my education as a Jew, and it was the *churban*, the destruction, which largely completed it.

Yet England made me, too, and I cannot forget that either. For some years I lived in an urbanised English village and was not conscious of segregation from my neighbours, whose reputation for insularity has been exaggerated. I belong to them a little and they belonged to me, yet they would have probably been puzzled to learn that I felt in some ways an outsider having more in common with certain people in New York, Tel Aviv or Moscow than with themselves.

They might not have understood why I was sometimes overtaken by desolation watching my small daughter playing in the sunshine, why a child's discarded shoe could germinate terrible images in my dreams. But if they ever guessed these things, I would have been confident of their compassion. Most of them, anyway.