

The Writer's World (I)

THE WAR, CHAVERIM
AND AFTER

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ONE SATURDAY MORNING Duddy took me to Eaton's. Instead of trying to lift stuff in the toy department we went directly to Lingerie and when nobody was looking darted into a hall with changing rooms. Duddy pushed open a door just in time for us to gawk at a gorgeous girl stooping to snuggle into a black lace brassiere. A fat saleslady let out a shriek.

"I was only looking for my Aunt Ettie," Duddy whined, retreating.

The saleslady snatched Duddy by the arm. "I'm going to get the manager and have you sent to reform school for life. Filthy things!"

"Aunt Ettie," Duddy hollered.

"Oh, let them go," the girl said.

"This one's been here before, you know."

"AUNT ETTIE!"

Doors inched open, outraged women glared at us. Duddy stepped on the saleslady's foot and we were off, scooting between shoppers, and flying down the escalator. Outside, Duddy said, "Did you see her bazooms, but? What a handful!"

We found some butts, lit up, and went to the mountain to search for couples in the bushes. "Everybody's doin' it, doin' it," Duddy sang. "Pickin' their nose and chewin' it, chewin' it." He told me that once he had found a couple stuck together, just like dogs, and had had to summon a St. John's ambulance man to get a kettle of boiling water to break them apart. I didn't believe him.

Duddy hated Mr. Blumberg, our fourth grade teacher at the Talmud Torah. One day he looked up Blumberg's address in the telephone book and led me through the snow to his house. While I waited, my heart thumping, Duddy peed in Blumberg's letterbox, rang the bell, and ran off.

Blumberg was a militant Zionist.

"How did we get arms for Eretz? Why, we bought them from the British. We'd pretend somebody was dead, fill a coffin with rifles, and bury it against . . . the right moment."

If we responded to this tale of cunning with yawns or maybe two fingers held up to signify disbelief, it was not that we weren't impressed. It was simply that Blumberg, a refugee from Poland, heaped a vengeful amount of homework on us and we thrived on putting him down. Blumberg fed us on frightening stories of anti-semitic outrages. Life would be sour for us. We were doomed to suffer the malice of the gentiles. But I wasn't scared because I had no intention of becoming a Jew like Blumberg was, with a foolish accent, an eye for a bargain, and a habit, clearly unsanitary, of licking his thumb before turning a page of the *Aufbau*. I was a real Canadian and could understand people not liking Blumberg, maybe even finding him funny. So did I. Blumberg had lived in Palestine for a while and despised the British army. I didn't. How could I? *In Which We Serve* was in its umpteenth week at the Orpheum. Cousins and uncles were with the Canadian army in Sussex, training for the invasion.

War.

"Praise the Lord," my father sang, demanding more baked beans, "and pass the ammunition." My brother wore a Red Cross Blood Donor's badge. I collected salvage. At the Talmud Torah we gave up collecting hockey cards for the duration and instead became experts on aircraft recognition. I learned to tell a Stuka from a Spitfire.

One of the first to enlist was killed almost immediately. Benjy Trachtstein joined the R.C.A.F. and the first time he went up with an instructor in a Harvard trainer the airplane broke apart, crashed on the outskirts of Montreal, and Benjy burned to death. At the funeral my father said, "It's kismet, fate. When your time comes your time comes."

Mrs. Trachtstein went out of her mind and Benjy's father, a grocer, became a withering reproach to everyone. "When is your black-marketeer of a son going to join up?" he asked one mother and to another he said, "How much did it cost you the doctor to keep your boy out of the army?"

We began to avoid Trachtstein's grocery the excuse being he never washed

his hands any more, it was enough to turn your stomach to take a pound of cottage cheese from him or to eat a herring he had touched. It was also suspected that Trachtstein was the one who had written those anonymous letters reporting other stores in the neighbourhood to the Wartime Prices & Trade Board. The letters were a costly nuisance. An inspector always followed up because there could be twenty dollars or maybe even a case of whiskey in it for him.

Benjy's wasted death was brandished at any boy on the street hot-headed enough to want to enlist. Still, they volunteered. Some because they were politically-conscious, others because boredom made them reckless. One Saturday morning Gordie Roth, a long fuzzy-haired boy with watery blue eyes, turned up at the Young Israel Synagogue in an officer's uniform: his father broke down and sobbed and shuffled out of *shul* without a word to his son. Those who had elected to stay on at McGill, thereby gaining an exemption from military service, were insulted by Gordie's gesture. It was one thing for a dental graduate to accept a commission in the medical corps, something else again for a boy to chuck law school for the infantry. Privately the boys said Gordie wasn't such a hero; he had been bound to flunk out at McGill anyway. Garber's boy, a psychology major, had plenty to say about the death-wish. But Fay Katz wrinkled her nose and laughed spitefully at him. "You know what that is down your back," she said, "a yellow stripe."

Mothers who had used to brag about their children's health, making any childhood illness seem a shameful show of weakness, now cherished nothing in their young so greedily as flat feet, astigmatism, a heart murmur, or a nice little rupture. After a month in camp with the university army training corps my brother limped home with raw bleeding feet and jaundice. A Sergeant McCormick had called him a hard-assed kike. "Why should we fight for them, the fascists?" my brother said.

"The poor boy, what he's been through," my mother said.

Hershey had a brother overseas. Arty's American cousin was in the marines. I was bitterly disappointed in my brother.

One evening my father read us an item from the front page of the *Star*. A Luftwaffe pilot, shot down over London, had been given a blood transfusion. "There you are, old chap," the British doctor said. "Now you've got some good Jewish blood in you." My father scratched his head thoughtfully before turning the page and I could see that he was pleased, flattered.

Only Tansky, the *roite* who ran the corner cigar & soda, questioned the integrity of Britain's war effort. Lots of ships were being sunk in the Battle of the Atlantic,

true, but how many people knew that U-Boat commanders never torpedoed a ship insured by Lloyd's or that certain German factories were proof against air raids, because of interlocking British directorships?

If Tansky was concerned about capitalist treachery overseas the truth is French-Canadians at home gave us much more cause for alarm. Duplessis's Union Nationale had circulated a pamphlet that showed a coarse old Jew, nose long and misshapen as a carrot, retreating into the night with sacks of gold. The caption suggested that Ikey ought to go back to Palestine. Mr. Blumberg, our fourth grade teacher at the Talmud Torah, agreed. "There's only one place for a Jew. Eretz. But you boys are too soft. You know nothing about what it is to be a Jew."

Our principal was a Zionist of a different order. His affinities were literary. Ahad Ha-am, Bialik, Buber. But I managed to graduate from the Talmud Torah uncontaminated. In fact I doubt that I ever would have become a Zionist if not for Jerry.

Jerry, who was in my classroom at Baron Byng High School, ignored me for months. Then, on the day our report cards came out, he joined me by the lockers, bouncing a mock punch off my shoulder. "Congrats," he said.

I looked baffled.

"Well, you're rank two, aren'tcha?"

Jerry represented everything I admired. He wore a blazer with JERRY printed in gold letters across his broad back and there was a hockey crest sewn over his heart. He had fought in the Golden Gloves for the Y.M.H.A. and he was a high scorer on our school basketball team. Whenever Jerry began to dribble shiftily down the centre court the girls would squeal, leap up, and shout,

X₂, Y₂, H₂SO₄,
Themistocles, Thermopylae, the Peloponnesian War,
One-two-three-four,
Who are we for —
JERRY, OLD BOY!

Jerry went in for rakishly pegged trousers and always carried condoms in his billfold.

"How would you like to come down to Habonim with me tonight? If you like it, maybe you'll join."

"Sure," I said.

The Habonim meeting house was on Jeanne Mance Street, not far from my grandfather's house, and I recalled that on Friday nights the old man glowered as the *chaverim* passed, singing. The fact that it was *shabus*, however, was all that

restrained my grandfather from calling the police to protest against the racket the chaverim kicked up. My grandfather was uncompromisingly orthodox. Turning on lights, tearing paper, were both forbidden on the sabbath. So late Friday afternoon one of my aunts tore up enough toilet paper to see out *shabus*. One of my uncles had devised a Rube Goldberg apparatus, the key part of which was a string attached to a clock that turned off the toilet and hall lights when the alarm sounded at midnight.

Now I would have to risk passing the house with the others. Shoving, throwing snowballs, teasing the girls, singing.

Pa'am achas bochur ya'za, bochur v'bachura. . . .

Jerry, chewing on a matchstick, picked me up after supper and on the way we called for Hershey and Stan. I was flattered that Jerry had come to my house first, and in the guise of telling him what fun Hershey and Stan were, I let him understand that I was a much more desirable boy to have for a friend.

Walking to Habonim with Jerry, Hershey, and Stan, became a Friday night ritual that was to continue unbroken through four years of high school.

THE WAR WAS DONE. Cousins and uncles were gradually coming home.

"What was it like over there?"

"An education."

We read in the *Star* that in Denver a veteran had run amok and shot people down in the street; the *Reader's Digest* warned us not to ask too many questions, the boys had been through hell; but on St. Urbain Street the boys took off their uniforms, bought new suits, and took up where they had left off.

IS HITLER REALLY DEAD? was what concerned us all. That, and an end to wartime shortages. These were rapidly overcome. Sugar, coffee, and gas, came off the ration list. The Better Business Bureau warned housewives not to buy soap or combs from cripples who claimed to be disabled veterans. An intrepid reporter walked the length of Calgary's main street in an S.S. uniform without being stopped once. HAVE WE FORGOTTEN WHAT THE BOYS DIED FOR? he wanted to know. Ted Williams was safe, so was Jimmy Stewart. McKenzie King wrote, "It affords me much pleasure both personally and as Prime Minister to add a word of tribute to the record of the services of Canadian Jews in the

armed forces in the recent war.” Nice, very nice. Pete Grey, the Toronto Maple Leafs’ one-armed player, was made a free agent. A returning veteran took his place in the outfield.

Harry, our group leader in Habonim, had been in the R.C.A.F., where it had been his job to show returned fighter pilots the combat films they had taken. Each time a pilot fired his guns, Harry explained, a camera in the wings took pictures. This way it could be established if a pilot’s claim to a kill was true. Some of the films, he said, showed enemy aircraft bursting into flames. But on the flight home most of the pilots swooped low over German streets to shoot up cyclists for sport. These films would end abruptly — just as the cyclists crumpled.

Hershey’s father, gone into the war a scrap dealer, a rotund good-natured man whose sporting life had once been confined to cracking peanuts in the bleachers at Sunday afternoon double-headers, now flew Army Ordnance Corps colonels and their secretaries by chartered airplane to his hunting and fishing cabin on a lake in northern Quebec. He emerged as a leading dealer in army surplus trucks, jeeps, and other heavy equipment. Hershey’s family moved to Outremont.

Duddy Kravitz drifted away from us too. Calling himself Victory Vendors he bought four peanut machines and set them up on what he had clocked as the busiest corners in the neighbourhood.

Jerry and I became inseparable, but his father terrified me.

“You know what you are,” Jerry’s father was fond of saying. “Your father’s mistake.”

Jerry’s father was a widower — a wiry grey-haired man with mocking black eyes. He astonished me because he didn’t eat kosher and he drank. Not a quick little schnapps with honey cake, head tossed back and eyes immediately tearing, like my father and the other men at the synagogue when there was a bar-mitzvah.

— This is quality stuff; the best.

— It warms you right here.

— Smooth.

Jerry’s father drank Black Horse Ale, bottle after bottle. He settled in sullenly at the kitchen table, his smile morose, and suddenly he’d call out, “Pull my finger!” If you did he let out a tremendous burp. Jerry’s father could fall asleep at the table, mouth open, a cigarette burning between his stubby blackened fingers. Sometimes he sat with us on Saturday nights to listen to the hockey broadcasts. He was a Canadian fan. “You can’t beat the Rocket or Durnan when the chips are down. They’re money players, real money players — Hey, here it comes.” He lifted himself gently off his chair. “SBD.” A self-satisfied pause.

“Know what that means, kid?”

Jerry, holding his nose, went to open a window.

“Silent but deadly.”

Jerry’s father ridiculed Habonim.

“So, little shmedricks, what are you gonna do? Save the Jews? Any time the Arabs want they can run them into the sea.”

On the occasional Friday night I was allowed to stay overnight at Jerry’s house and the two of us would sit up late and talk about Eretz.

“I can hardly wait to go,” Jerry said.

I can no longer remember much about our group meetings on Fridays or the impassioned general meetings on Sunday afternoons. I can recall catch-words, no more. Yishuv, White Paper, emancipation, Negev, revisionist, Aliya. Pierre Van Paasen was our trusted ally; Koestler, since *Thieves in the Night*, was despicable. Following our group meetings we all clambered down to the damp cellar to join the girls and dance the hora. I seldom took part, preferring to puff at my newly-acquired pipe on the sidelines and watch Gitel’s breasts heave. Afterwards we spilled exuberantly onto the street and usually went on to one of the girls’ houses to dance to the music of Sammy Kaye and Arty Shaw. Spike Jones was very big with us; so were Frank Sinatra, Danny Kaye, and the Andrew Sisters.

On Saturdays we listened to speeches about soil redemption and saw movies glorifying life on the kibbutz. All of us planned to settle in Eretz.

“What’s there for a Jew here? Balls all squared.”

“Did you hear about Jack Zimmerman’s brother? He came third in the province in the matrices and they still won’t let him into pre-med school.”

Early Sunday mornings we were out ringing doorbells for the Jewish National Fund, shaking tin boxes under uprooted sleepy faces, righteously demanding quarters, dimes, and nickels that would help reclaim the desert, buy arms for Hagana and, incidentally, yield thirty-five cents each off the top — enough for the matinee at the Rialto. We licked envelopes at Zionist headquarters. Our choir sang at fund-raising rallies. And in the summertime those among us who were not working as waiters or shippers went to a camp in a mosquito-ridden Laurentian valley, heard more speakers, studied Hebrew and, in the absence of Arabs, watched out for fishy-looking French-Canadians. Our unrivalled hero was the chalutz, and I can still see him as he stood on the cover of God knows how many pamphlets, clear-eyed, resolute, a rifle slung over his shoulder and a sickle in his hand.

After the meeting one Friday night Jerry pulled me aside. “If my father calls tell him I’m staying over at your house tonight.”

“Sure,” I said, delighted, and I offered to invite Hershey, Stan, and some of the others over for a poker game. Then, looking into Jerry’s apprehensive face, I suddenly understood. “Oh. Oh, I get you,” I said. “Where you going, but?”

Jerry put a finger to his lips, he gave me a poke. For the first time I noticed Selma walking slowly and satisfied ahead of us down the street. She stopped to stare into a store window.

“Go to hell,” I said vehemently to Jerry, surprising myself.

“You’ll do it, but.”

“Sure, sure,” I said, hurrying off in the opposite direction.

Selma was reputed to be hot stuff — crazy for it — but all I saw was a shy dark girl with long blue black hair, a manner that was somewhat withdrawn, and the loveliest breasts imaginable.

“You know what she told me,” Hershey said, “She broke it jumping over a fire hydrant when she was a kid. Oi.”

Even Arty, who was as short as me with worse pimples, claimed to have sat through *The Jolson Story* three times with Selma.

One Friday, having managed to walk all the way to Habonim without once stepping on a sidewalk crack, I asked Selma to come to a dance with me. But she said she was busy.

ON THE NIGHT of Nov. 29, 1947, after the UN approved the partition plan, we gathered at Habonim and marched downtown in a group, waving Israeli flags, flaunting our songs in Anglo-Saxon neighbourhoods, stopping to blow horns and pull down streetcar wires, until we reached the heart of the city where, as I remember it, we faltered briefly — embarrassed, self-conscious — before we put a stop to traffic by forming defiant circles and dancing the hora in the middle of the street.

“Who am I?”

“YISROAL.”

“Who are you?”

“YISROAL.”

“All of us?”

“YISRO-YISRO-YISROAL.”

Our group leaders, as well as several of the older chaverim, went off to fight for Eretz. And in the febrile days that followed the proclamation of the State of

Israel we gathered nightly at Habonim to discuss developments in Eretz and at home. A distinguished Jewish doctor was invited to address the Canadian Club. To the astonishment of the community, the doctor said that though he was Jewish he was, first of all, a Canadian. Israel, he said, would make for divided loyalties, and he was against the establishment of the new state. The *Star* printed the complete text of the doctor's speech.

— If Ben Gurion speaks maybe they can fit in a paragraph on page thirty-two, but if that shmuck opens his lousy mouth. . . .

Punitive action came quickly. The editor of the *Canadian Jewish Eagle* wrote that the Star of David will long outlast the *Star* of Montreal. We collected money door-to-door so that A. M. Klein could reply to the doctor on the radio. We also, I'm sorry to say, took to phoning the doctor at all hours of the night, shouting obscenities at him, and hanging up. We sent taxis, furniture removers, and fire engines to his door . . . then, as one event tumbled so urgently over another, we forgot him. Harry, we heard, had been interned in Cyprus. Lennie, another chaver, was a captain in the army.

One day we opened our newspapers and read that Buzz Beurling, Canada's most glamorous war ace, had joined the Israeli air force. At Habonim it was whispered yes, it's true, but the price was a thousand dollars a month. We had outbid the arabs.

Beurling never got as far as Eretz. His fighter plane crashed near Rome.

Abruptly, our group began to disintegrate. We had finished high school. Some of the chaverim actually went to settle in Eretz, others entered university, still more took jobs. We made new friends, found fresh interests. Hershey entered McGill. My marks weren't high enough and I had to settle for the less desirable Sir George Williams College. Months later I ran into Hershey at the Café André. He wore a white sweater with a big red M on it and sat drinking beer with a robust bunch of blond boys and girls. Thumping the table, they sang loudly

If all the girls were like rabbits,
and I was a hare I'd teach them bad habits.

My companions were turning out a little magazine. I had written my first poem. Hershey and I waved at each other, embarrassed. He didn't come to my table, I didn't go to his.