

WHY I AM AN EXPATRIATE

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ON A HOT JUNE DAY in 1949 I sailed from Montreal. I stood by the rails on the deck of the British freighter that was taking me to Newcastle. From the first mate's cabin a record was playing *Bye, Bye, Blackbird*. I remember watching the Mountain, the Sun Life Building, the Jacques Cartier bridge, and wondering when I would see all this again.

I had left Canada once before, in 1944, on a troopship. Then I took it for granted that I would come back. This time I was far less certain.

I was leaving for a stay in England of at least two years. For I had just received a five thousand dollar fellowship with which to continue post-graduate work at London University on my proposed thesis: "The Decay of Absolute Values in Modern Society". But I knew, even then, that I had no great interest in the academic. It was, mainly, just the means of getting me over. And I wanted to get over because of the English girl who sat beside me at McGill and took the same courses as I did and who was returning home, to London, after graduation; and also, because I had in my Gladstone bag the manuscript of my first novel. The publisher in Toronto had read it and said I would have to get it published in New York or London; then he would look after the Canadian market.

These were, as I remember them, my immediate reasons for sailing up the St. Lawrence on the freighter. But why I stayed on in England and became an expatriate goes back much further, and may account for the mixed sentiments I had leaving Canada on that hot June day.

It began, I imagine, when I was five; when my mother took me one morning from the house on St. Joseph in Ottawa, crossed St. Patrick and walked to York Street, and left me at the public school to begin my first day. I could not speak a word of English.

I was brought up in an orthodox Jewish home. My parents, and those

who came to visit them, spoke only Yiddish with a few Polish or Russian words thrown in. Everyone else in that street, and those surrounding it, was French Canadian. The hostility and indifference of this neighbourhood, and the close-knit set-up of the small Jewish community, tended to keep us children fairly immune from any contact with Canadian society, except for going to school—but that was close to home, and remained Lower Town.

It wasn't until I went to High School that I began to leave Lower Town. (Although there had been the odd sortie: like going for blotters to the stores on Rideau, Sparks, and Bank—selling exhibition tickets opposite Zeller's on Saturdays—or once, when I was around nine or ten, running away from home by hitch-hiking with a friend to what is Uplands Airport today but what used to be farmland, and being brought back by the police).

The best thing about High School was getting there—riding in the early mornings, especially in the fall along the Driveway, by the Canal, on the blue CCM bicycle with the handlebars turned inside out, until you came to the Avenues, on the opposite side of the city. Otherwise it had little attraction. We went to that particular High School because our parents couldn't afford to send us to university. And we remained there until, legally, one was free to leave; then we would go and work in the government.

For the two and a half years that I went there I spent my time doing shorthand, bookkeeping, filing, typing, and writing business letters. In spare hours we had some English, very bitty; some geography, and Canadian history. We were also taught penmanship and everyone came out of there with that easy-to-read mass-produced commercial style. (I rebelled against this to such an extent that I can hardly read my writing today). Then we had salesmanship. We had to go in front of the class and pretend we were selling something—a car, a house, or life-insurance—to a classmate, while our teacher criticized our technique.

Although I wasn't getting much of a formal education at High School I did get one from a different source. I became a member of a left-wing Zionist youth movement. Originally it consisted of my friends who now lived in the neighbourhood, around Murray Street. We had built a ping-pong table together and used to go out skiing in the Laurentians or swimming at Britannia and Hog's Back. Then someone older came from Mon-

trical and invited us to join the youth movement. We wore grey-blue shirts with green kerchiefs at the neck, just like Boy Scouts. But our immediate aim was to end up in Palestine and live and work on one of the *kibbutzim*.

We rented a clubhouse—a bare room above a shoe-store on Rideau Street—and we would come here at nights, on weekends, whenever we were free. We drew up schedules, and read Marx, Adam Smith, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Veblen, and gave lectures in front of each other. We pooled our spending money. We ate pork on the Sabbath. We sang *Ballad for Americans*. And we argued about religion, free love, capitalism and communism, Hedy Lamarr, *The Book of The Month Club* selections, *Gloomy Sunday*, and girls.

As soon as I could, at sixteen, I left High School, and worked in the government as an office boy until I was eighteen. The year was 1942. So I joined up as aircrew with the RCAF, and after training out west graduated as a pilot officer and eventually ended up with 429 Squadron at Leeming, Yorkshire.

The kind of life I suddenly found myself leading in England was completely different from what I had known in Canada. All the time in Ottawa I was conscious of living on Murray Street, Lower Town, but that one didn't belong; the appeal of the left-wing Zionist youth movement was that it recognized the fact that to be Jewish here in Canada meant that you were excluded from feeling that you belonged to what was going on in the country. In England I found myself being attended to by a series of batmen, all old enough to be my father. We ate in a fine mess. A string quartet played for us while we had our Sunday dinner. And on the wall above us was the *Rokeby Venus*. We lived well. We had lots of money to spend. The uniform gave us admission to all sorts of places. And perhaps because one was twenty, I suddenly found myself absorbed in "living", where before it seemed one was just hanging around, marking time.

Occasionally I would be made to realize the distance that had grown between myself and my background. My father, though he was able by this time to speak a hesitant English—was unable to read or write it. And by the time I went overseas, though I could with difficulty make myself understood in Yiddish—I was unable to read or write it. Consequently we were unable to communicate and had to keep silent.

I REMEMBER not long after the war was over going to see a film, "The Best Years of Our Lives". I don't remember it as a particularly good film. But it did touch on that feeling that one had when returning to Lower Town—to the banner on the wooden verandah saying WELCOME HOME SON; the peddlers' horses and wagons parked on both sides on the street; the eyes of middle-aged women staring from behind lace curtains—that one could not go back to this past. Whatever issues the war had been fought over, I now found myself fighting a personal battle as well.

At first this took strange forms. I found myself pretending that I didn't live in Lower Town. I would get off the street car on Laurier in order to walk through Sandy Hill, rather than take one to let me off on St. Patrick, which was only a block away from home. I began to live in a fantasy world; pretending that I wasn't Jewish, giving myself fictitious parents. And I started to write, a novel, set in Austria. (Needless to say I had never been to Austria—but had read the week before a book about Vienna that was lying around the house). The clubhouse, politics, going to Palestine, didn't interest me. The rift the war had opened up was too violent for me to pretend to forget that other way of living which seemed so much freer and less provincial. The price I had to pay, I could not have realized at the time.

But the war was over, and something had to be done. I decided to go to university—mainly to postpone the decision of what to do. I did not want to return to work in the government. I decided on McGill partly because I have always liked Montreal: for us from Ottawa it meant 'the big time'. And I remembered as a child fruit-peddling with my father, crossing over the small bridge by Lansdowne Park and seeing—when the wagon came up to the rise—the Redmen playing rugby in the stadium. It was only a glimpse, but long enough to decide me on McGill.

At university I was in my element—mainly because I could not take it seriously. I graduated with two degrees, first class honours, various prizes, a scholarship, and the five thousand dollar fellowship. Even at the end, I was unable to take any of this seriously because I considered all along that my presence there was something in the nature of a fraud.

The only reason I was able to be there in the first place was because of the Veteran's Act; fifty per cent of my flying class was killed. And on top

of that, on my first day I was asked to fill in a registration card. They wanted to know my entrance qualifications—Junior Matric. Not having it, I filled in the first figures that came into my head. Had anyone bothered to check up, that presumably would have ended that. But they didn't. Since then I have always nourished a soft spot for the academic when it deals with human nature.

At McGill I continued to play out this fantasy. It was, on the whole, very pleasant. I found myself going to magnificent houses with clinging vines, sloping lawns, flower beds and rock gardens. From their windows I could see the city below with its churches and bridges and factory chimneys. Occasionally I did make a gesture. I took a room in an old cellar on Dorchester Street, next to the boiler. The slot of a window faced the railway lines. The room was narrow, dingy, and there was always a film of grit on the walls and my face when I woke up. My friends would come here in their fathers' cars, have a good look—they put this down to some perversity on my part—then we would leave and drive comfortably away to the cottage with the period furniture; the top flat with the butler; or cocktails at the Berkeley. But throughout this, and the dinner-dances, the nice people, the lectures, the talk, and the all night balls: "There was," as Sir Thomas Browne has said, "another man within me that's angry with me."

By the time I left McGill I was pretty confused. Things seemed so far to have fallen in my lap, as long as I continued to play this game—which was, for me, just a series of pretenses. The postponement of any decision, which I got by going to university, was now up. The choice I had to make was either to continue the way I had, and it seemed all too easy and attractive to do so—or else try to come to terms. I didn't think I could do this by living in Canada, where I would always feel a sense of betrayal.

I had by this time also realized that all I wanted to do was write. And I knew that this would be easier, at the beginning, away from home. Writing, in the immediate circle of relatives and friends, was resented; even though they paid lip service to it. Mainly because I did not follow their own ways of existence. It shocked them that I should try to 'make a living' from something so precarious as writing poems, stories, or novels. They would have said nothing against me if I had gone door to door selling life insurance.

So I came over to England.

But postwar England came, at first, as something of a surprise. War-time England meant for me a life of abundance, care-free good times, new experiences. Now, it meant sharing with another Canadian a peeling flat that was falling to bits; queueing up once a week for the cube of butter, the small Polish egg, the bit of cheese, the few rashers of streaky bacon, the ten cigarettes under the counter. And also, perhaps for the first time in my life, I began to accept my past, and to understand myself; by some irony, the closer I came to that, the closer I began understanding my fellow-man.

Now, I like going back to Montreal, Ottawa, Lower Town. After I have lived in England for a few years, I feel it necessary for this reminder; it somehow puts certain things right for me; and I enjoy being back. Whether I live in Canada or not, that doesn't seem so terribly important at present. I find it exciting whenever I return, while I don't find that about England. I guess I could live in England another ten years without feeling any compulsion to write about it. But I find it a good place to live and work—I feel pleasantly anonymous. What happens when I have run dry of my Canadian things? I don't know. That is the price one has paid for living away. But it doesn't concern me as yet, and in any case one always falls back on the personal. A British novelist who read *Canada Made Me* said, "You know I think what you really would like to have been was an orthodox Jew." Perhaps. But that is impossible in the world I know. And, although my parents could not have known it, it all began with the sound of a schoolbell on that first morning when I was five. What followed was inevitable.