HELPING WITH INQUIRIES
An Autobiography

LOUIS JACOBS
HELPING WITH INQUIRIES
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TO MY CONGREGATION
THE NEW LONDON SYNAGOGUE
IN APPRECIATION OF THEIR COURAGE, SUPPORT AND LOYALTY THROUGHOUT THE YEARS
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I doubt very much whether the story of my rather uneventful life would have been worth recording had it not been for the so-called Jacobs Affair in which I had a central role. I cannot claim that in the following pages an objective account of the Affair is presented. After all, as one of the protagonists, I look back to see it in terms of my own personal experience and my bias hardly needs to be mentioned. Nevertheless, while this book cannot be considered objective history, I have tried to present the arguments and activities of my opponents without distortion of their views and with as much fairness as I could muster.

My wife, Shula, has kept, with admirable thoroughness, scrapbooks containing practically all the newspaper cuttings and other material on the Affair. I am indebted to her for everything I have written but this book in particular could never have seen the light of day without her painstaking work of recording the material on which it chiefly relies. On the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the New London Synagogue, Anne Cowan, using the material Shula had collected, edited a good deal of it under the title *New London Synagogue: The First Twenty Years*. This has helped considerably for the chapters on the Affair. For the earlier chapters of the book I have relied chiefly on my memory. These chapters are not directly relevant to the Affair but indirectly do have a bearing on it.

It would have been quite impossible to avoid details of my personal life in telling my story. For the same reason I have been obliged to mention the members of my family — Shula, Ivor, Naomi and David, and their families — but I know that they prefer me to do as I have done, that is, to concentrate more on ideas than on personalities. I still hope that enough has been said about the various persons I have known (and, in some cases, fought against) to save the book from dullness.
PREFACE

The title of the book is self-explanatory. All the fuss was really about whether traditional Judaism could be seen as a quest rather than as a corpus of dogmas fixed for all time by divine fiat.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the Honorary Officers, Council and Members of the New London Synagogue and to all my other friends who have been unstinting in the encouragement they have given me to ‘help with inquiries’.
The city of Manchester, where I was born on 17 July 1920—famous for its alleged anticipatory thinking, for the Hallé Orchestra, the Free Trade Hall and the splendid Town Hall (a cathedral to business, as it has been dubbed), from the tower of which one could, on a clear day, see the Blackpool tower over forty miles away—had, and still has, the largest Jewish population in the United Kingdom outside the metropolis. In those days the majority of Manchester Jewry lived in the Cheetham and Hightown districts of north Manchester and its neighbouring Salford, together with a sprinkling in the posh district, also in the north of the city, of Heaton Park. The Jews of north Manchester were prominent in the raincoat and waterproof industries, both as manufacturers and as the workforce. Most of them hailed originally from Russia, Lithuania and Poland. Contrary to the conventional picture of English Jews in the twentieth century as solidly middle class, there was a sizeable Jewish working class in Manchester, as well as in Leeds on the other side of the Pennines.

The Jews of south Manchester, on the other hand, were either of German extraction or were Sephardim, Oriental Jews from Syria and other Near Eastern countries, engaged for the most part in shipping. My mother used to refer to these as ‘Turks’ and I had a vision, derived from the pictures of Turks in the comic books, of them wearing a fez and curled, pointed shoes.

The epithet ‘Mancunian’, after the old Roman city on the site, was sometimes used of Manchester citizens. When I visited a congregant in London soon after I had taken up a rabbinic position there, she said: ‘You are a Manchurian, aren’t you?’, to which, with my dark features and rather sinister goatee beard, I could but reply: ‘I only look like one.’
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My parents were married for over ten years before their only child was born, with the consequence that I suffered from the disadvantages of that state and wallowed in its advantages. I had no living grandparents so the essential 'spoiling' for which they would have been responsible was carried out quite adequately by my parents and by a host of aunts, uncles and older cousins, both my parents belonging to large families.

My paternal grandparents, Yehudah Laib (after whom I am named) and Sarah, both came from the town of Telz in Lithuania, the home of the famous Yeshivah. My grandfather's great hero was Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Spektor, the illustrious rabbi of nearby Kovno, whose Responsa on Jewish law are authoritative to this day. My grandmother (my Zaide's second wife) was either the daughter or grand-daughter (I have never been able to discover which) of Rabbi Laib Hasid, a well-known figure in nineteenth-century Lithuanian Jewry, who, despite his appellation, was no 'Hasid' but a saintly Litvak.

Grandfather was strictly observant. My father once told me that he had received a smack across the face, when he was a grown man, from his father for failing in some religious duty. For all that, the old man's authority could not have sat too heavily on his children, who always spoke of him fondly. My father and his two brothers always managed somehow to evade parental watchfulness when they went along to watch Broughton Rangers, the Rugby team, playing on the Sabbath. Through my father's influence I, too, became a Broughton Rangers fan.

My father also liked to tell how, after long years hoping for a child, his father, no longer alive, came to him in a dream and said to him: 'Harry, begin to put on tefillin. You will have a son.'

Grandfather, I am also told, had remarkable skills in bone-setting, and for a time he was a milkman. By these and various other occupations he managed to eke out a living in a strange land. Yet he seems to have been easily adaptable to the new environment. At first he lived in Canterbury of all places, where there was a small Jewish community with its own synagogue, but later he moved to London where my father was born, in Brick Lane, I believe. When my father was four years of age the
family moved to Manchester, my Zaide becoming a prominent member of the little synagogue in Julia Street, Strangeways, just across the road from the forbidding prison. The Telzer and Kovner Hevra, as its name implies, was founded by my Zaide’s landsleit who had preceded him there. Yiddish was the language in the home but Zaide learned to speak broken English with a Manchester accent. A photograph I have of him and my Bubbe shows him resplendent in a smoking jacket with velvet lapels and an embroidered smoking cap set rakishly on his head. With his snow-white, patriarchal beard he looks like a cross between an Edwardian dandy and an old-time rabbi.

My mother Lena’s parents, Carl (Kasriel) and Agnes Myerstone, came to England from Mittau, near Riga, in Latvia. Like most Latvian Jews, they were more Westernised, certainly far more than my father’s parents. They, too, spoke Yiddish but in a more Germanic mode. My mother was the youngest of eight children. Her older brothers established themselves in Manchester, Hyman as a retail clothier, Wolf as a jeweller, both helping to support the large family. These two uncles quickly adapted themselves to life in this country. Hyman eventually became President and Wolf the Treasurer of the Great Synagogue in Manchester, the English Shul, as it was called to distinguish it from the more ‘foreign’ and less decorous synagogues in the city. There my parents were married. The rabbi of the Great Synagogue was Dr Salomon, a graduate of the Orthodox Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin. Chazan Newman, the synagogue cantor, was a highly gifted musician with a fondness for good food. It was rumoured that when the cost was being negotiated for a wedding banquet, the caterer would ask: ‘With or without Chazan Newman?’ I can still recall standing in line with other little Jewish boys and girls as Dr Salomon’s cortège, taking him to his last resting place, proceeded solemnly through the streets.

Both my parents attended the Jews’ School. My father did well at the school, winning a place at the prestigious Manchester Grammar School. He was unable to accept, his father requiring an extra breadwinner to augment the family’s meagre income. All his life, his not inconsiderable intellectual talents
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were consequently wasted as a worker in Jewish-owned raincoat factories. He himself never saw it that way. He was always proud to be a working man, sticking his neck out on more than one occasion on behalf of his fellow-workers against the 'bosses', though he was never a member of the Labour party. The majority of Jews at that time voted Liberal. Whenever a famous Liberal speaker came to Manchester, my father and his friends would make a point of being there and perhaps being introduced to the speaker. My father really did know Lloyd George!

My mother also took well to her schooling. She loved English literature in particular and could recite huge chunks of narrative poetry, such as *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, by heart. To supplement my own schooling, she would spend hours with me reading Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia*. In a different age and in different circumstances she might have carved out a career for herself, but there were no opportunities in that direction for poor Jewish girls in Manchester. She was a particular fan of Gilbert and Sullivan. I was brought up on songs from Gilbert and Sullivan; *The Mikado* was a special favourite.

My father volunteered to serve in the Army before the compulsory conscription in the First World War but he was rejected on grounds of ill-health. Instead he became a special constable. (His highly polished, embossed 'truncheon' now assists the decor in my son David's flat.) He would often regale me and my cousins with tales of his prowess in defeating crime, though he never fought against desperate criminals with the odds heavily against him, as I would romantically have liked to hear him tell. In the Second World War he again served as a Special Constable, this time as a traffic controller. His friends and members of the family would make a point of crossing the road where, resplendent in his neat uniform and policeman's cap, he would stop the traffic for them.

My father, like my mother, had an excellent memory. Unlike her he did not read much apart from the daily paper, but he remembered everything he had ever read and could come up with an apt quotation whenever he was called upon to speak, acquiring something of a reputation as a public speaker. At family celebrations he was always invited to give the toast of
Grandfather – Yehudah Laib Jacobs, b. Telz, Lithuania

Grandmother – Sarah Jacobs, b. Telz, Lithuania
Father at Jews' School, Manchester – class photograph

Author at Jews' School, Manchester – class photograph
I was born in Penrose Street in the Hightown district of Manchester. The names of the surrounding streets were derived from the place-names and flora of the Lake District, the source of Manchester's water supply. There was a Thirlmere Street, an Elm Street, and a Sycamore Street—the 'Magnolia Street' of Louis Golding's novel, where Jews lived on one side of the street, Gentiles on the other. Penrose Street was rather more ghettoised, only two non-Jewish families living there, the Robinsons and the Ridleys. I was a close friend of Norman, the younger of the two Ridley boys, but stood in awe of his father, a policeman. The Jewish mothers in the street, including mine, would threaten their unruly children with: 'If you don't behave yourself I'll tell Constable Ridley.' Mrs Ridley in particular did not take kindly to the position given to her husband of honorary watchdog for Jewish juvenile delinquents.

There were two Jewish grocery shops: Dardik's at one end of Penrose Street, Sheinberg's at the other. Meat and chicken were bought at the kosher butcher-shop, just around the corner, in Heywood Street, owned by a Mr Kahn, whose son was studying at the Telz Yeshivah. I had heard much about Telz from my
father, who had heard it from his father, but it was Mr Kahn’s talk about his son’s prowess at the Yeshivah that captivated me, although, at that time, I had no more than the vaguest notion of what a Yeshivah was. Other shops in the district were Radivan’s the greengrocer’s, selling huge, luscious pickled cucumbers; and an all-purpose store, owned by non-Jewish people, whose name I have forgotten, patronised by Jewish children for its mouth-watering array of sweets and chocolates. Long strips of liquorice and large sweet concoctions known as ‘gob-stoppers’ were the main draw on our meagre pocket-money. At this shop we bought our comics – the Beano, the Magnet and so forth. We were aware that there really existed public schools with characters like Billy Bunter and Harry Wharton, where Latin was taught and where brothers were addressed as Smith major and Smith minor, but it was all as remote from our own world as the adventures of Weary Willie and Tired Tim.

Relations between Jews and Gentiles were fairly good in Manchester generally. In Hightown, they were cordial. Jewish boys had non-Jewish friends but we were warned not to eat terefa food when we visited our Gentile ‘pals’. On the whole they managed to avoid any sly digs at Jews, as we were careful never to ridicule Christian practices. Occasionally, however, chiefly in fun, organised battles took place between Christians and Jews. During one of these fights in the school playground, I was captured by the Christians who tied my boot-laces together in order to incapacitate me from continuing the struggle. With my non-pugilistic, not to say cowardly, record, I doubt that I would have been much good even with my laces untied. A useful function of the non-Jewish boys of the neighbourhood was to light the fire in Jewish homes on the Sabbath in winter, a task they gladly undertook since the few pennies they received in payment were very welcome.

Although most of the Jewish working men in Manchester did not work on the Sabbath, most of them did not go to synagogue either. But they sent their children to the Friday night and Sabbath morning services. I used to go to a little synagogue in Elm Street, where I had my Bar Mitzvah. I recall being amazed, when I was little, at the ease with which the worshippers could rattle off the lengthy Hebrew prayers, convinced that I would
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never be able to gain fluency in the strange language. On
special occasions, my father would take me to the splendid
Great Synagogue with its stained-glass windows, its top-hatted
wardens and prayer-books with English translations on pages
facing the Hebrew. When I saw the heading ‘Hymn of Glory’,
not having come across these words before, I concluded that it
must somehow be a reference to my Uncle Hyman, President of
the synagogue.

At the age of five I was enrolled at the St John’s School, also in
Elm Street, a crumbling, neo-Gothic monstrosity of a building
with cracked walls and outside toilets, scheduled for demolition
within the year. Whatever the demerits of the building, the
atmosphere in the school was relaxed and pleasant. My earliest
recolletion, still very vivid, is looking through the railings of
this school at the age of about three to gaze at my cousin Marje,
playing with her friends in the playground, my mother saying:
‘That’s where you are going to go when you are a little older.’
I have questioned many people over the years about their very
early recollections. Their memory of very early events in their
lives has generally been the same as mine; that perception in
infancy does not differ in kind from that in adolescence and
adulthood. Of course, a little child has far fewer objects of
perception and far less ability to reflect on his experiences, but
that which he does experience seems to be perceived with the
same clarity as that of grown-ups.

When the school closed, I was enrolled at the school which
my parents had attended, the Jews’ School in Derby Street at the
bottom of Cheetham Hill Road. I still have a school photograph
of Class Four in the school and another of my father in the same
class some fifty years earlier. The resemblance between the two
of us is uncanny; both of us with the same very dark features
and both wearing the school cap askew in exactly the same way.
My dark complexion was an acute source of embarrassment to
my mother and her sisters. My maiden Aunt Ettie would often
take me on an outing to the pictures or to a restaurant for
tea, but, before we set out, she would give my face a liberal
sprinkling of face powder. Once she overdid it and a women
friend stopped us in the street to say: ‘The little boy is so pale. Is
he well?’ My mother did not look at all Jewish. On one occasion
she took me along with her to buy something in a Jewish-owned shop, where she overheard the shopkeeper say to his wife in Yiddish: ‘Take a look. A shiksa with a Yiddisher yingel.’

The Jews’ School in Manchester, like its counterpart, the Jews’ Free School in London, was established in the last century with the aim of helping the children of Jewish immigrants to become fully integrated into English society. All the teachers were staunch English patriots. The day began with prayers and hymns in English; a popular one was sung to the rousing tune of ‘Deutschland, Deutschland, Über Alles’—naturally, it was given words more appropriate for Jewish boys and girls in England. On Armistice Day at 11 o’clock in the morning, we all had to observe the two minutes’ silence, after which we were treated to a patriotic speech extolling the virtues of the great country that had been so hospitable to the Jews, many of whom had given their lives for her in the Great War. For all that, our thoughts were directed frequently towards Palestine, Manchester Jewry being strongly Zionist in outlook. On Tu Bishvat, we would be given the blue and white boxes of almonds from the Holy Land, by courtesy of the Jewish National Fund. In my teens I joined the Young Zionist Society and would go around with my friends soliciting contributions to the Fund.

At the age of eight, I suffered a severe attack of appendicitis and was rushed off to hospital to have my appendix removed. The operation was successful but I still have a huge scar on my abdomen to show for it. Anaesthetisation was a tricky affair in those days. It was done with a chloroform pad placed over the nose and mouth. I remember the anaesthetist asking me up to what number I could count. ‘To a million’, I replied. ‘Go ahead and count’, said he, which I did, succumbing when I reached nine. My mother was a religious woman in her own way and was not averse to seasoning her religion with a dose of superstition. She would never sew a button on my clothes while I was wearing them unless I chewed on something while she was doing the sewing, otherwise, she had been told, I would acquire ‘a cat’s head’ (a katz in kop). I remembered this years later when I read in the Talmud that since cats eat mice and since whoever eats food from which mice have eaten forgets his learning, it follows a fortiori that the cat, unlike the dog, is a
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forgetful creature. Naturally, then, when I was taken to hospital my mother heeded the advice of a local rabbi that my name be changed. A prayer is recited in the synagogue for a severely sick person in which it is stated that X’s name has been changed to XY so that any evil decree on X no longer applies, since he is now not X but XY. Joshua Trachtenberg refers to the process in his Jewish Magic and Superstition. So Hayyim (‘Life’) was added to my name and, for years afterwards, I was called to the Torah as Hayyim Yehudah Laib, but eventually dropped this, not out of a brave defiance of superstition; it just happened.

Like most Jewish mothers in Manchester, my mother was afraid of the evil eye. A poor woman with a powerful squint was particularly suspected of possessing this baneful power. This woman, meeting me with my mother, did not exactly say: ‘What a lovely little boy!’ – that would have been too blatantly untrue – but she did look at me, making some complimentary remark. No sooner had the woman left us, than my mother spat three times, placing a little of the spittle on my face, evidently in the belief that this was effective in preventing the consequences of the evil eye.

My mother’s faith in miracle workers was given expression when a niece of hers was lying dangerously ill in hospital. Mother consulted a rabbi who gave her some kind of amulet to place under her niece’s pillow at the hospital but warned her it would only work if she kept silent, not speaking to a soul, on her way to perform her mission. Off she went but as luck would have it she met one or two friends on the way, whose greetings she met with stony silence. ‘What’s the matter with Lena Myerstone?’ her friends declared. ‘She’s become very stuck up lately.’ Undeterred, mother carried out her task. Her niece made a miraculous recovery, thanks to the skill of the doctors, said those not in the know. Mother knew better. It was due to the rabbi’s amulet and her ability to carry out his instructions to the letter.

After my operation, my parents treated me as if I was wrapped in cotton wool, which, due to the large bandage I was now obliged to wear round my middle, in a sense I was. I recall being terribly embarrassed when seeing tears in their eyes while we watched the film in which Al Jolson sang the horribly
sentimental 'Sonny Boy'. The outcome of all this coddling was my transfer to a third school, the Jews' School being thought by my parents to involve too long a journey for their delicate offspring. The new school in which I was enrolled, Temple School, a few blocks away from home, had excellent teachers and was housed in an attractive modern building. The boys and girls (like the other schools, it was co-educational) were encouraged to read widely and to express their own thoughts in writing. The English teacher had stamps with the picture of an elephant which he would stick on to the first page of a particularly commendable essay produced by a pupil. I won my 'elephant' for an essay on the trite subject, 'A Visit to the Zoo', in which I wrote that the monkeys I had seen there were so like humans that they supported Darwin's theory. I began another essay on the economics of coal with: 'Coal, that great saviour that has enriched mankind', or some such pretentious one-upmanship. The teacher read this out to the class with an ironic smile but he still gave me my 'elephant'.

That such topics were discussed at all by eleven-year-olds and younger speaks eloquently for the advanced methods of Temple School. But all good things come to an end. Elementary schooling was only up to the age of eleven. On reaching that age I was obliged to go elsewhere. I had the ambition to win a place at the Manchester Grammar School, like my father, but no arrangements were made for this at Temple School. Of course, I cannot say whether I would have won the place in any event, but I was not given the opportunity to find out. Instead off I went to be enrolled at the Manchester Central High School for Boys, second in prestige only to the Manchester Grammar School. The entrance examination for the school consisted of an interview in which three teachers (a Beth Din) fired questions at the candidate to test his IQ (the term itself had not yet been invented). Among other questions I was asked: 'Who is the King of Spain?' (he had been deposed, so it was a trick question) and 'Describe an umbrella.' To ask the latter of a Jewish boy without expecting him to use his hands was to try his patience considerably.

The teacher of Ancient History at the school humbly consulted the Jewish boys in his class whenever there was a need to discuss the Biblical period. On Friday afternoons, the English
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Literature teacher would read aloud from *The Wind in the Willows* in a melodious voice and gently led us into an appreciation of captivating English writers.

Most of the Jewish boys at the school came from more or less observant homes. We were exempt from attendance at Christian prayers; the Jewish sixth-formers tried to share with us, in a room set aside for the purpose, their somewhat perfunctory knowledge of Judaism. Their favourite method was to read passages from *Ethics of the Fathers* without explaining them very much. They repeated Hillel’s famous saying so frequently that ‘If I am not for myself who is for me?’ became a catchword for the younger boys, who jokingly used it whenever trying to defend their rights. We did not eat the school meals but brought sandwiches which we ate at a separate table in the dining hall. The Jewish boys met with little anti-Semitism, except from a group of boys who lived in at the Chetham’s Hospital, established in the seventeenth century as a home for orphans. These boys were obliged to wear an outfit, dating from the eighteenth century, with long skirts and silver buckles on their highly polished shoes. Looking ridiculous and resenting it, they vented their spleen on the Jewish boys, most of whom lived in terror of these cherubic toughies. When they taunted us with the cry ‘Yid’ or ‘Sheeny’, none of us dared retaliate with ‘Girlie’ or ‘Cissie’ and we had to grin and bear it. On only one occasion I plucked up enough courage to engage in fisticuffs with a Chetham’s Hospital boy. I lost, of course, and earned a black eye, to the consternation of my mother and the pride of my father, who was fond of saying: ‘Always stand up for yourself. No one else will’ – little knowing that he had been anticipated by Hillel.

Unfortunately, my father’s income was such that my attendance at the Central High School became too heavy a drain on the family resources so I moved to my fifth school, the Cheetham Senior School, also close to home. Mr Chapman, the headmaster of the school, ruled with an iron hand, doling out floggings (on the hand, with a cane) with alarming regularity. But the pupils in the top form, to which I was admitted, were allowed by him to go their own way to a large extent. The prefects, as we were grandiloquently called, were permitted a certain latitude in attending classes. Instead, when we were not
lording it over the youngsters and telling each other off-colour jokes, we organised such things as school plays and classes in public speaking. We also spent a good deal of time oiling the cricket bats for the use of the school team, in which I was wicket-keeper. 'Howzat' became my favourite shout in dreams and while awake. When I put on my tefillin after Bar Mitzvah, if there was a match that day, I used fervently to pray that I might succeed in stumping out a record number of the opposing side. My fondness for the game had been nurtured by my father who, in summer, when there were no Broughton Rangers fixtures, would take me (on the Sabbath, I have to say) to watch the cricket at Old Trafford. My moment of glory came while sitting, with other boys, just near the boundary at a Test match. Don Bradman, the famous Australian cricketer, was fielding and made a magnificent catch just within the boundary, to fall at my feet with the ball held firmly in his hand.

With a good deal of effort and the help of a Jewish printer I knew, we also managed to produce a school magazine, in which my first little piece in print appeared – a hideous poem praising the school. Years later, when I was a rabbi in my home town, I paid a courtesy call on the headmaster, who had retained the only copy of the magazine to have been published, which he gave to me, perhaps only too glad to be rid of the memory of what, by any standards, was an unruly lot of boys. His first words were: 'So you are one of those people who think they can put the world to right. Humph!' – after which he relaxed sufficiently to discuss his problems with me over coffee. He and the other teachers were blunt, forthright Lancashire men and women whose caustic manner concealed their real sense of vocation. Against the odds, they persevered in trying to impress a degree of learning and culture on very unpromising material. It will have been noticed, however, that my general schooling has been desultory and I have suffered from it.

My Jewish education was equally varied and uncertain at first. Boys, but not girls, were expected to spend an hour or two each day at one of the Hebrew schools, of which there were many, privately run by melamdim, Hebrew teachers possessing varying degrees of competence. There was an excellent Talmud Torah in Manchester using modern pedagogical methods but
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run on completely traditional lines. The Principal of the Talmud Torah in my day was Dr I. Slotki, who was succeeded by his son, Dr Judah Slotki, both renowned educationists. My father had received his Hebrew education at the Talmud Torah. He was fond of reciting the Hebrew poem he and the other boys had to learn in order to welcome Sir Samuel Montagu (later the first Lord Swaythling) when that worthy paid a visit to Manchester. For some reason I was not enrolled in the Talmud Torah but attended a succession of Chedarim. The first of these was conducted by a Mr Hirsh, an elderly gentleman whose English was inadequate so he tried to teach us in Yiddish, a language of which we knew nothing. It soon became evident that it was a complete waste of time, so my parents sent me to learn Hebrew and the other requirements at the house of a young man in Penrose Street itself. This young man had studied at Manchester Yeshivah and was a capable teacher. I still recall him reading with us the narrative in Genesis of the war of the four kings against the five and making it all come alive. Unfortunately, he contracted tuberculosis (this was before the discovery of penicillin) and had to be admitted to a sanatorium, where he lingered until his death some years later. My next Cheder was run by an optician with a good knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish literature, Mr Nachman Engelsberg. Mr Engelsberg, a staunch Zionist, introduced his charges to the niceties of modern Hebrew literature and Jewish history, enlivening the lessons with Jewish jokes of all kinds, most of them stale but for us very fresh. Nachman soon emigrated to Eretz Yisrael and lived to witness the establishment of the State of Israel. I was again on the move, this time to a Cheder that changed my life.

Reb Yonah Balkind opened his Cheder at the age of nineteen. At the time of writing, almost sixty years later, Balkind's Cheder is still headed by this extraordinary pedagogue (may he live to be a hundred and twenty!). In my time the Cheder was situated in a barn-like structure in Elizabeth Street, Hightown. Reb Yonah took the lessons in a large room on the ground floor. Helping him to keep order was the non-Jewish caretaker and general factotum, a Mr Peart, of whom the boys stood in almost as much awe as of Reb Yonah. The upper floor had been converted into
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a recreation area, serving as a boy’s club for the youngsters of the Cheder and the neighbourhood, all Jewish of course. Here were installed a fine billiard table and tennis table. Reb Yonah and Mr Peart taught us how to play both games. One or two of the Cheder boys acquired such prowess at ping-pong that they became world champions.

Rebbe Balkind, as most people referred to him, was beyond doubt the most naturally gifted pedagogue I have ever met, in spite of the fact, or possibly because of it, that he was self-taught in the art of teaching. (He gained his vast knowledge of Judaism in his native Gateshead and at the Manchester Yeshivah.) He had constant recourse to practical illustration. For instance, when we studied the portion dealing with the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness he would take us to the floor upstairs where we would proceed, equipped with the necessary tools, to try our hand at constructing a scale model. Inevitably we met with difficulties, pointed out by the critics, but it was part of the fun to see whether we could make the model stand without collapsing, which it never did. (According to some of the critics, the Tabernacle was an ideal structure, based on Solomon’s Temple, but the boys at Balkind’s, and I imagine Reb Yonah himself, had never heard of Biblical Criticism.) Or when we arrived at the portion (we studied the biblical portion of the week with complete regularity) in Exodus dealing with the ox that falls into a pit we would be led outside into the earthen yard where some of us would actually dig the pit while others would act out the part of the ox.

Rebbe Balkind conducted the Cheder purely out of his love for Judaism. He had to live, of course, but, compared with the other Chedarim, his tuition fees were laughably low. The poorer boys (of which, when my father was out of work, I was one) were given free tuition. He was single at the time. When he married and had to support a wife and family, he had to be a little more realistic, but he remained indifferent to a fault to financial gain. Whenever I wish to understand something of what the Talmudic Rabbis meant by Torah lishmah (‘Torah study for its own sake’), I cast my mind back to Rebbe Balkind and his dedication.

In the higher classes of the Cheder, we studied the weekly portion together with Rashi’s commentary for which we were
Author, aged 10, with parents Harry and Lena

Mr Balkind and the Old Boys of his Cheder at the wedding of one of them
Mr Balkind – second from left; author – second from right
Shula in 1942 at Kibbutz Shivat Zion in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire

Manchester wedding, 1947
first obliged to master the ‘Rashi script’. A particular innovation in Rebbe Balkind’s Cheder was the ‘speed test’. Each boy would be required to read, as quickly as he could, a given number of lines from the Hebrew while the Rebbe took a mark off for every mistake and Mr Peart stood by with a stop-watch. The mark taken off for a mistake was made to count as an extra second, the idea being to see which boy could get through the lines with the greatest speed. On a chart the name of the boy who did it in the fastest time each week was displayed, efforts being made to break the record – held for weeks, I recall, by Sidney Olsberg, a real champion who managed to read the lines in just over two minutes. Nowadays educationists may throw up their hands in horror at such a method of teaching. All I know is that it succeeded in producing hundreds of youngsters who were never embarrassed in later life by their lack of fluency in Hebrew.

I have always seen Reb Yonah as my teacher par excellence. Even when a rabbi in Manchester, I stood in awe of him. He frequently came to the synagogue to hear me speak or preach but he made me feel inadequate, without intending to do so, because my boyhood teacher stood before me in my mind’s eye. It was characteristic of the man that even when I had blotted my copy book in his eyes, he refused to denounce me but tried to understand why I held such strange views. I am afraid that I did not even try to convince him, realising that such an attempt would be quite fruitless. He was set in his ways as I had become set in mine. Unwilling to embarrass this kindly teacher, I have never tried since to communicate with him. On more than one occasion I was tempted to send him something I had written but, rightly or wrongly, resisted the temptation. In the words of the Talmud, ‘A mountain has raised itself between us.’ If he reads these remarks or has them conveyed to him, I hope he will understand them for what they are: a sincere tribute to a great teacher to whom, more than any other, I owe whatever appreciation of traditional Judaism I may have.

A particular favourite of Reb Yonah was the Commentary to the Bible by R. Moses Alsheikh, the preacher in sixteenth-century Safed. The Alsheikh (‘the Sheikh’) is, of course, homiletical. One would not normally go to it for serious Biblical
exegesis. Yet, in Reb Yonah’s skilful exposition, we youngsters could not help admiring the brilliance of the sage of Safed, gifted, so Reb Yonah would tell us, with ruah ha-kodesh (‘the holy spirit’). In other than its strict theological sense, the Alsheikh, and Reb Yonah himself, were truly inspired.

Reb Yonah was a fundamentalist but so was every other Orthodox teacher I had in those days and later. Perhaps it is too imprecise to state it so baldly. It was not that he and my other teachers positively rejected historical methods. They were simply unaware of their existence. Traditional views on all matters were the only views they entertained or wished to entertain. There was a narrowness in their approach but this was offset by their appreciation and great love of the Torah, and the mitzvot. Reb Yonah was born in England and spoke (and largely thought) in English. But his spiritual home was the Lithuania of the famed Yeshivot, the learned rabbis, the pious householders, with never an unworthy thought allowed to intrude. He would no doubt consider me to be one of his failures, but his successes were many—pupils won to traditional Judaism by this dedicated man. Having said this, I cannot pretend that I have regrets for having moved eventually out of that world with its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

Although neither my parents nor my aunts and uncles were strictly observant Jews, there was a traditional Jewish atmosphere in our home. No one in our family, for instance, would ever have dreamed of belonging to a Reform synagogue. The degree of observance may have been less than perfect, otherwise, but father did not go to work on the Sabbath, neither did my uncles, and they recited kiddush and grace after meals on the day. Dressed in my Sabbath best, I would visit my Uncle Hyman and Aunt Bertha and Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary. They lived respectively in Maud Street, on one side of Penrose Street, and Crummock Street on the other. Uncle Hyman had acquired a collection of adventure stories in his boyhood. On my weekly visits I would read chapter after chapter of these as well as the Arabian Nights, from which latter I learned captivatingly of Sultan Al-Rashid, Sheherezade, djinns, the ghouls and the magicians.
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On Passover, we would enjoy Aunt Bertha’s hospitality for the first Seder, Aunt Mary’s for the second. During a lull in the proceedings at both homes my cousins would regale us with songs from the musical comedies, not quite relevant to reflection on the Exodus but very enjoyable nonetheless.

On Passover afternoons I would be taken to visit my mother’s relations who lived along Cheetham Hill and then to my father’s who lived in Strangeways, where we sampled the ginger and eingemachts, a mixture of beetroot and syrup prepared by my aunts and female cousins. Later we would discuss which of the relatives excelled in the art, Aunt Bertha usually winning hands down.

Passover, in Manchester, was the season when games with nuts came into their own. Boys and girls who had acquired skill in these games would come home with pockets bulging with nuts to be scolded by their parents for ruining their best suits and frocks. It being Yom Tov, no one played for money. Only the most lax youngsters handled money at all on the festival. Consequently, without our consciously being aware of it, a semi-religious atmosphere was imparted to the games.

Uncle Hyman was a gramophone buff. He also would try to get the right station on his ‘cat’s whisker’ radio, a fascinating object for me. On one occasion, Uncle Hyman had a Caruso record on the gramophone, and just as the singer had completed his aria in popped the shamash of my uncle’s synagogue to collect the dues. I was a little boy and a gullible little boy at that, so when Uncle Hyman jokingly remarked that the shamash was Caruso who had popped out of the gramophone, I believed him. The shamash had a long beard and my mother had a habit of referring to anyone with a long beard as a rov. For years afterwards, the result of it all was that my mind was totally confused as to the real identity of shamashim, rabbis and Caruso. Tiny though I was, I am still ashamed to confess that I thought the few old, bearded men in the little synagogue around the corner somehow went home after the service to live in the gramophone. I must also confess that I still share with some of my colleagues some uncertainty about the role of a rabbi in the Jewish world of today.
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On the eve of Yom Kippur my father would carry out the kapparah ceremony as he had seen it done by his father. The ceremony, originally done with a cockerel, for which my father, like his father, substituted a sum of money, was denounced by the author of the Shulhan Arukh (code of Jewish law) as superstition, but Isserles gives it as the Ashkenazi custom. Father would wrap the money in a handkerchief and swing it first around his own head (one has to find atonement for oneself before one can help others to find it), then around mother’s head, then around mine, saying (in Hebrew): ‘This is the atonement. This money will be given to charity while I (you) will proceed to enjoy good and long life.’ The Biblical length of days is the traditional Jewish blessing. But the greeting to those who have lost a near relative, ‘I wish you long life’, is peculiar to this country and is unknown in other countries where Jews live. It would be of interest to learn how the practice originated and why only in Anglo-Jewry.

Before going to synagogue for the Kol Nidre service, father would go the house of a friend and neighbour just down the street, also named Jacobs, though no relation, to say (in Yiddish): ‘May we succeed in our supplications (ausbetten) for a good year.’ We would then go to the service in the hall of my first school, St Johns, which was still standing even though the school itself had been demolished. (There cannot be anything to it, but it is a coincidence that my synagogue is in St John’s Wood and was once known as the St John’s Wood Synagogue.) The hall was lit by naked gas flares. Whenever I hear the Yigdal hymn being sung to the traditional melody, I am taken back to that hall with the worshippers chanting this hymn with the same melody while the gas lights flickered to provide a strongly numinous atmosphere.

Of all my aunts, Aunt Sarah was the most observant. She was the daughter of a Hasid from Austria and followed, as best she could, the pattern of Jewish life she had witnessed in her home. Her preparations for Passover were most stringent. Everything had to be thoroughly scoured before Passover, including the tables so that there was not the slightest possibility of even the minutest bit of leaven being left in the house. Once I confessed to her that I was afraid of the dark. Read the Shema, she said,
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before you go to bed and nothing will harm you or make you afraid. It did not quite work but it helped. Aunt Sarah was the second wife of my father’s older brother, Alec. Before he could marry Sarah, he had to obtain a get from his first wife. Little as I was, when I heard Alec discussing the get with my father, and being very uncertain what a get was, I naturally thought it was something to do with marriage that Uncle Alec had to ‘get’ and for which he had to pay some of his hard-earned cash – which, in fact, it was.

As a boy I belonged to the ‘Penrose Street Gang’. We were far less sinister than the name suggests, our main activities being to play cricket in summer and football in winter with rival ‘gangs’ and fight these on occasion, and to collect wood for the bonfire on Guy Fawkes’ night. We were all great jazz fans, with Cab Calloway our special hero. Many years later, Stefan Grapelli performed at one of the concerts instituted by the New London Synagogue. Afterwards he remarked to the Chairman of the synagogue that he was gratified to see the rabbi tapping his feet to the melody of ‘Tea for Two’.

On Saturday nights we would all go in a group to the pictures with Mars Bars for refreshments. Whenever we could we liked to watch gangster films starring Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson and Paul Muni. The last two, we felt, were the greatest since they were Jewish. When a horror film or other films declared unsuitable for children were being shown we would plaster our hair with brilliantine and tell them at the ticket office that we were sixteen, the age when admittance to such films was allowed. We usually got away with it.

Fed, like the majority of Jewish boys in my neighbourhood, on a diet of piety of a very undemanding kind, the joys of the cinema, the excitement of sport, the appeal of jazz and the affection of the family, my boyhood was far from unhappy. Manchester may have been a rainy city; it was never a gloomy one, at least, not for a boy growing up in the Jewish district. I cannot say that my schooldays were the happiest days of my life but they were not the worst by any means.