

# BEYOND ST. URBAIN STREET

By

MAX STERNTHAL



**“From the perspective of my ninetieth year, this candid account of my struggles, successes and failures, will hopefully serve as an “ethical guide” to my grandsons and all young people about to enter today’s competitive world.**

*Max Sternthal*

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## Foreword

My objective was clear: to write an account of my life's struggles, failures and successes, for the benefit of my teen grandsons who were reaching the crucial years of decision about the direction of their future life.

I wrote half of this book in 2000, in my 74<sup>th</sup> year, while recuperating from heart surgery. In 2016, while my children were organizing a party for my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, they urged me to write more stories to explain pithy sentences such as: "I spoke to the pretty lady behind me. Two months later we were married. We had three beautiful children, and our lovely grandsons." I agreed, and "Engaged on Third Date" and "Honeymoon" stories joined the original list, along with stories regarding Rusco Ottawa's growth, and my thirty-year role as Cantor for Temple Israel Congregation. The 2000 and 2016 writings have been merged for this book. Consequently, the reader will find a more complete story, though occasional repetitions of facts appear.

## My Gratitude

Words are inadequate to express my gratitude to **Bruce Clark** for his patience in receiving my calls on most days for rescue as I fought with a "hostile" computer. Whether retrieving a "lost" story, organizing a table of contents, or finding and adding photos to the text, arranging and rearranging the order of the stories, Bruce's wizardry on the computer made the printing of this book possible. I would like to say more, but with respect for Bruce's modesty, I will simply say: "Thank you, dear friend."

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## **PREFACE**

*“Two young boys were lost in the forest. Together they looked for the path that would lead them out of the forest. They tried many paths, but they led nowhere. Suddenly, they came upon an old man. They asked him if he could show them the true path out of the forest. The old man said: ‘I too am lost. I have tried many paths that led nowhere. Let us join hands. I will point out the paths that led nowhere and you will do the same. Then, together, we will try the remaining paths and we will find the true path out of the forest.’ The two boys and the old man joined hands, and soon found their way out of the forest.”*

*Jewish Wisdom Source*

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

*If I am only for myself, what am I?*

*If not now, then when?*

*Rabbi Hillel (75 BCE)*

# 1926 to 1942

## **This is St. Urbain Street**

When the dawn broke over St. Urbain Street, Ben's father was opening up the door to his bake shop; Sam's father was loading his wagon with fresh fruit and vegetables; the "twins" father was running for the street car that would take him to his "cutter" job in the dress ("shmatta") district downtown; and my uncles were already on the road with their peddler packs.

When the dawn broke over St. Urbain Street, my father was standing in our dining room, facing east, wrapped in his Tallis (prayer shawl) and Tfillin (phylacteries) murmuring his morning prayers. I was five when it occurred to me that my father was not like my friends' fathers. He did not have a job or business to cause him to leave the house. I learned that my father was "shomer shabbos" (observer of the Sabbath), which meant that he could not work along with my uncles, as peddlers who did the major part of their weekly work on Saturdays.

My mother's six brothers (my uncles), who had immigrated to Montreal from the same town as my father, regarded him with scorn and disapproval for not supporting his family. They were Orthodox Jews, who regarded providing for one's family as the highest priority, even working on the Sabbath.

The account that follows is the best recollection of my life when I was 74 in 2000 and further recollections in my 90<sup>th</sup> year (2016).



## Fear

Fear is the first emotion I recall from my early childhood. My family was occupying a “railroad” flat in the Montreal ghetto. I enjoyed running the length of the flat. I only stopped to play with a gas stove, situated near the end of my run. I was fascinated by the “toggle” switches which were in my reach if I stood on my tip-toes. It was fun to turn the four switches on by pulling on the switches. It was not fun for my family who rushed to turn the switches back when they sniffed gas in the air. When scolding and spanks did not prevail, my family decided more drastic measures would have to be employed to secure the family safety.

The next day I set out on my usual run. When I reached the gas stove, I stopped short and let out a horrifying scream. Grinning at me were four horrible face-masks which, in my frightened state, seemed to be shouting: “Don’t touch the gas stove!!!” Shouting for my mother to come and comfort me, I ran to the end of the house. Clutching her arm tightly, I allowed my mother to lead me past the stove while I averted my glance. In the weeks that followed I would look away as I rushed by the stove. I don’t know how long the masks adorned the stove because I never looked that way.

In later years when the conversation ran to ‘earliest memories’ I would tell the story of the gas stove and my experience of that powerful emotion: fear.

## A Penny

I never heard the word “depression” during my boyhood years in the Montreal ghetto. I heard sighs and words: “these are hard times” or “everything is so expensive” or “if Eva or Yetta get a job, we’ll be able to buy these foods.”

I learned about the power of money through the penny my mother gave me each day to spend as I wished. I realized that every decision I made for a particular candy, meant that I would have to forgo the pleasure of another candy that was equally desirable.

Each of the four corners near our flat contained a store. One was a “herring” store, another, a “dairy” store, the third, a used-book shop, and the fourth, a candy store with a soda fountain counter and a grill.

Mr. Fields was the owner and sole manager of the candy store and he lived on my street with his two children who went to my school. Clutching my penny in my hand and pressing my nose against the glass of the candy showcase, I carefully surveyed the wonderful display of candies and debated the merits of various choices: a piece of licorice, a stick of gum (with a picture of a hockey player), 2 nougat ovals, or a chance to win a small chocolate bar by gambling with my penny. I could choose a small mint wrapped in silver paper from a box filled with similar-wrapped small mints. When I bit into the mint and it revealed a white centre, I lost, but if it revealed a pink centre, then I could choose any candy bar in the case! So many choices! Do I settle for a sure small candy or do I gamble for something grand? There were many situations in my later life where I faced the same choices, but with larger stakes.

The soda fountain and grill held special treats for me and my pal Ben. If we saved five pennies, Mr. Fields would grill a hot dog

and a bun. On the counter were two large jars of yellow mustard and relish, with no limits on our use. Ben and I would carefully split the hot dog. If I only had two cents, I could enjoy a grilled bun with all the trimmings, but no hot dog.

I knew nothing of economics, but I remember thinking there was something wrong with the world, when a mature family man, feeding a family and paying rent on a flat and a store, leaned patiently on the candy showcase while I slowly deliberated on how I would spend my penny. That was the beginning of my thoughts, conscious or unconscious, that I must make money and get out of the ghetto.

## My Father

My father spoke to me twice. The first time, when I was 8 or 9, we were walking down the street together and I started to whistle.

He turned to me and said: “Jewish boys don’t whistle. Goyim whistle”.

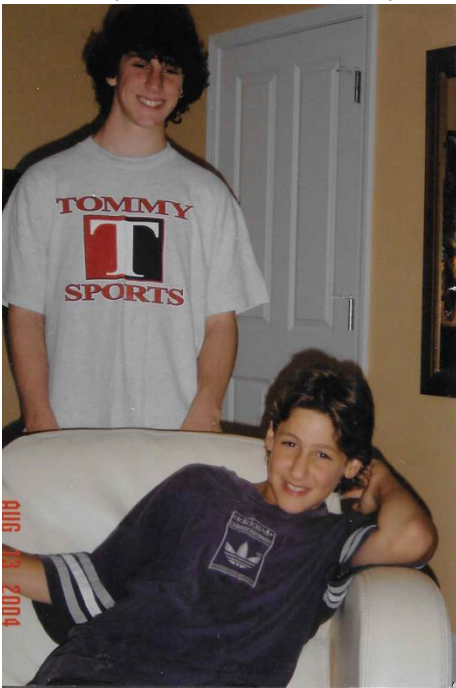
The second time, when I was 14–15, he spoke directly to me and said: “Study to be a bookkeeper. It’s a clean job and you can make steady money”.

At the time I didn’t think much about his advice, but I thought it was a compliment of sorts; he was acknowledging that I was a smart boy and needn’t follow my older brother, Julius, into a

dress factory where he had found work.

If my grandsons, Michael and Adam, read this and ask: “Poppa, are you serious? You never spoke to your father other than these 2 times, I would have to answer seriously and say: “These are the only times I recall a direct conversation”.

If they ask: “Why?” I will try to answer by describing what my



home was like, and how I recall my mother and father, and how my brothers and sisters related to each other.



My father came to Montreal, alone, in 1924 from Romania. My mother followed a year later with my brother Julius, age 7, my sister Yetta, age 5, and my sister Eve, age 3. A year later in 1926, I was born—the first home-born Canadian in our family. Eight years later, my brother Abe was born. In his youth, we called him Boomie. My mother's mother (Bubbie Chaya) and my mother's younger sister (Auntie Freda) and my mother's six brothers and their families all came to Montreal between 1921 and 1925. They were my extended family, as no one from my father's family ever came to America.

When I was 4 or 5, my Bubbie, who had been living with Auntie Freda in her home (Bubbie was a widow (my Zayda died in Russia around 1917) moved into our flat. That's when the trouble started between my parents. My Bubbie was a strong-willed woman who inspired great respect and love from her children. Her six sons were all imbued with a strong work ethic (like most immigrants) and threw themselves into work schemes

to feed and shelter their families. They all started as peddlers, driving a horse and buggy into the countryside and selling small items: pins and thread, and clothes and blankets for the farmers. They could only speak Russian and the farmers could only speak French, but no language is necessary when you are a peddler. You show your goods and show by your fingers how much money you want. They all made enough to look after their families and soon graduated to become “Custom Peddlers” in the city itself. A “Custom” or “Customer Peddler” had a list of people that he took to a store where they bought clothes and furniture that they needed. The peddler paid for what they bought and then the customers paid the peddler back the money they owed by paying a fixed amount every week until their debt was paid. There were no charge accounts in those days, so the peddler was the first businessman to sell on credit. If the peddler paid out \$52 on your behalf, it was common for him to collect \$2.00 a week (\$104) for his trouble. Most peddlers did well financially and soon earned enough money to rent store space and open their own businesses, as my uncles did.

My father was another story. He was “Shomer Shabbas”. That meant he did not work on the Sabbath, from Friday at sundown to Saturday night. If you were a peddler you did 100% of your business in that exact time, because that is when your customers (who were mostly Christian) were available to go with you to the stores to choose and buy the things they needed. I imagine the peddlers also collected their “weekly” installments on Saturday because they would not be welcome on a Sunday.

All of my uncles were observant Jews but they worked on the Sabbath to feed their families. My father would not work on the Sabbath. The consequence, of course, was no Gentile customers, and thus no means to feed his family. He had a few Jewish customers and a few Gentile customers who were willing to do business when he was available to do business.

When my Bubbie moved in to our home, whatever peace there was in our home vanished. I recall my Bubbie sitting at our kitchen table where we ate all our meals. She spoke disparagingly about my father to my mother. She compared his lack of business zeal and success to her successful sons while my mother worked in the kitchen, constantly cooking, washing, and mending, to keep her family going. When my father came in for his midday meal, my Bubbie wouldn't greet him but would retire to her room. It wasn't long before my mother's pain was expressed to my father, who ate his meal without speaking. He would then tie a parcel with some sheets or blankets and leave the house to visit some of his few customers.

As the years passed, it seemed to me that the silences of my father grew longer and longer. He withdrew into himself until he became a shadow that passed us in the house and street without a nod. He asked nothing and gave nothing in return. Of course, I knew nothing of his pain - in truth I did not think of him at all. However, when I entered the little synagogue across the street on a Sabbath, I saw another side of my father. My father was learned in the Torah and every Saturday he would be the "Bal Kriah", the "reader" of the Torah. He would chant seven long chapters of the weekly "Sedra" (portion of the Torah) while seven men who were honored stood beside my father as he chanted their portion. In that company my father was respected and he displayed an ease as he smiled and even joked with the men who respected him. The moment passed. He came home from the synagogue, ate his Shabbat meal alone and in silence. Then he would sit at the dining room table and open a large printed Torah and in a soft voice chant in preparation for next week's portion.

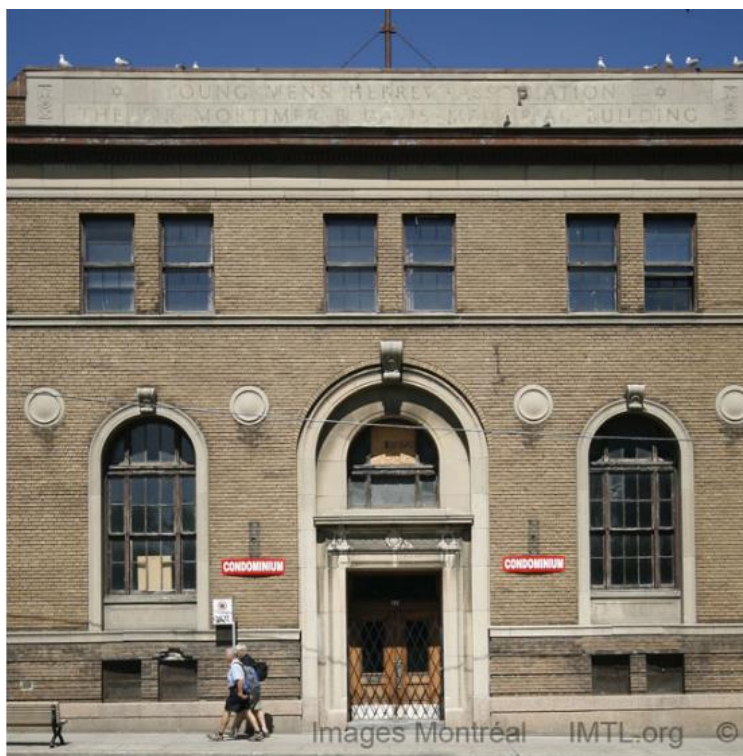
My earliest recollection is the feeling: if I need something, material or other, I will not look to this source for help... I will find other sources or rely on myself. I had great anger at my father, not because he failed me, but because he caused pain to my mother who had to struggle so hard to keep our family going, not knowing if the bare essentials of our life would be available at the end of the day.



My mother was the glue that kept the very separate parts of our family together. I don't believe it even as I write this now, but we only sat down at the table together as a family twice a year, on the first and second nights of the Passover Seders. The rest of the year, my father, my brothers and my sisters, would follow their own schedules, and come into the kitchen individually and my mother was always there to place a meal in front of us; if we didn't care for what she had prepared, she would attempt to produce whatever we expressed a wish for.



## Learning to Cope - YMHA



If you are wondering how I lived with this, or what I thought about it, the answer was that I coped the way my father coped—I absented myself. The quarrelling of my parents and lack of interaction with my brothers and sisters drove me from my home to my new-found refuge—the YMHA which was one block from my door. When I was seven or eight, I discovered the ‘Y’ on Saturdays after sun down, when I and 300–400 children lined up outside the auditorium of the ‘Y’. When the doors opened we ran to take our seats and enjoyed a wonderful Oneg Shabbat program of blessings, sing-songs, plays and movies. Soon after I observed choir members entering the building as soon as they arrived I joined the choir and I never again had to line up outside the door to get in. I discovered then that I had a “voice” and was

soon doing solos. The beautiful melodies have remained with me for life and even now, 75 years later, I can close my eyes and render all the Hebrew melodies from memory.

Once inside that beautiful building, I made another discovery that set me on a path for the rest of my life. At one end of the building there was a library with books from floor to ceiling, some reading tables and two large, comfortable leather chairs in the corner, where I spent hours without end reading my way around the library. The knowledge of the whole world was there waiting for me to enter. How exciting to fan the pages of the Encyclopedia Britannica, look at the pictures, pull books at random off the shelves, open them in the middle and taste a few pages to see if I wanted to spend more time with them by reading in the big leather chair or taking them home with me. I knew then that I knew where to find the answer to any question I could not ask my father, mother or family. Somewhere, in the books, was the information, the knowledge, I needed to help me form decisions about the kind of person I would like to become, and what that person-to-be was going to do with the rest of his life. So many questions, so little time... I wished there was a grown-up (father) with whom I could discuss and share these thoughts. Fortunately, when I walked up the stairs to the second floor I found what I longed for.

The second floor of the 'Y' consisted of 3 small offices, a large lounge (we called it the "Social Hall") and 10 meeting rooms. This was the "Education Department" of the "Y. Three permanent staff respectively looked after programming for the Jr. & Juvenile Dept. (6-13 years), the Intermediate Dept. (Teens) and the Adult Dept. I greatly admired these adult figures and wasted no time in adopting them as my extended family and surrogate parents. When I came home from school, I immediately went to the 'Y'. I hung around the staff office and soon became a useful "Gofer". I would go for coffee in the cafeteria, or assemble pages of program notes and staple them

together, or I would set up chairs in the meeting rooms for groups that were meeting that night, or deliver messages to other staff persons in other parts of the building. My daily presence was dependable, my actions quick, efficient, and delivered with a smile; before long, I was an accepted part of the staff. The best time was when there was nothing for me to do. I could sit quietly in the corner of the office and listen to the discussions, and sometimes heated arguments, of the staff, who were discussing how to foster “Jewish Values” in a Christian Canadian society. Listening to their discussions, I learned for the first time that there were many views as to the “direction” Jews should go. The ‘Y’, I found out, only represented one of many, sometimes opposing viewpoints.

There was an Orthodox congregation that met every Saturday morning in one of the larger meeting rooms. Their influence was strong enough to keep the ‘Y’ closed from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday night (when they opened with an Oneg Shabbat program that led me to the ‘Y’ in the first place). There was an element in the membership, and even one staff member, that were secular in the expression of their Jewishness. They were supporters of Socialist and Communist movements in the Jewish working-class community that lived densely in the area near the ‘Y’. Another group stressed the idea that “Zionism”, the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine, was the only goal worth striving for.

By and large, the majority of Jews who joined the ‘Y’ were striving, consciously or unconsciously, to get out of the Ghetto, to be accepted by Canadian society as equals, and to taste the sweetness of material success. Probably the name YMHA was chosen to make the point that our goals were really the same as the YMCA goals.

I thought as I listened: “I too want to get out of the Ghetto. I too want a part of the Canadian dream.”

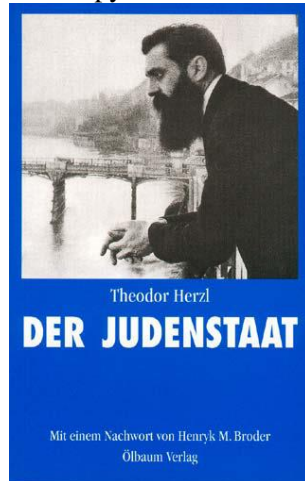
But I don't want to sacrifice my Jewishness in order to advance myself. Is there a way to reconcile these often conflicting goals? Who is right about the road to travel to be the best Jew in the late thirties? Hitler's strident voice and the "Seig Heils" on the radio, the dark warnings in the Jewish press and in the Canadian press sometimes, lent an urgency to find the right direction.

"Knowledge is the key to understanding, and then wisdom".

That's what my surrogate 'Y' parents taught me and I believed with single-minded dedication. I put in double time in the library. I pushed myself to the limit: Find a copy of "Der

Judenstaat", Theodore Herzl's book in which his argument for a Jewish State is presented to the world in 1896; Study the history and work of the World Zionist organization; Read the Balfour Declaration; Study Britain's interests in Palestine and the Middle East and how their interests often worked against the promise of a home for the Jews. I attended meetings of various Socialist, Communist and Zionist groups, including many visits to a

Hashomer Hatzair group, who were dedicated to training themselves to make Aliyah to Palestine as soon as possible. I listened, I discussed ideas I had read, I asked hard questions that often angered others but brought me closer to balanced answers, and above all I learned the songs they sang that expressed their hopes and visions.



## I Love Books

I love books. I respect books. I experience a feeling of excitement and anticipation when I open a book for the first time. I remember that feeling the day my first-grade teacher gifted me with a small stack of readers on the last day of the school term. She recognized my desire to read and provided me with materials over the summer months.

The discovery of a good library in the YMHA became the focus of my life. As soon as school let out, I headed for the library. I scanned the books on the shelves. If a book cover seemed interesting, I took the book off the shelf and opened it near the centre and read a page or two. If the pages I read aroused my interest, I would curl up in one of the large leather chairs, beside the windows at the rear of the library, open the book to the first page, and start to read. The lights going on in the library, in the late afternoon, would alert me to the hours that had past. I would check out the book and rush home for dinner.

Books were my constant companions. I read at least one major (thick tome) book each week. I had my own system of choosing books to read. If an author pleased me, I would search for other books by the same author. If the author of a non-fiction book made reference to another author's book, I would go in search of that book. When I found agreement on some point by two or more authors, I would consider that a truth to be remembered.

My fiction reading favoured historical novels. Alexandre Dumas', *The Three Musketeers*, and the three novels that followed the lives of the Musketeers into old age, intrigued me for weeks on end. Similarly, a *Lanny Budd* series of 10 books, traced the adventures of Lanny Budd, FDR's surrogate throughout World War II.

Books on the five Mafia families intrigued me, (as did the

movies: *The Godfather* and *Wise Guys*) Perhaps this story of a close family life appealed to me, when contrasted to my own family. In the same vein, I found my eyes tearing when viewing *The King's Speech* when King George VI relates his awkward moments with his austere father, King George V.

Zionism was front and central to my life from the age of three when I was lifted to place a penny in the blue JNF box attached to the wall of our home. Monies collected were used to plant trees in Palestine, the Jewish homeland.

I read biographies of Jewish heroes. I thrilled to the story of Joseph Trumpeldor, a former Captain in the Czar's army, who went to Palestine to organize resistance to Arab marauders in remote settlements in the Gallilee.

I was overwhelmed to read his last words, as he lay dying from his wounds: "It is good to die for one's country."

I read biographies of Theodore Herzl, a secular and assimilated Jew, who unleashed a powerful thrust for statehood that gripped the entire Jewish world, from the westernized Jews of America and Western Europe to the teeming traditional masses of Eastern Europe. I read and reread his book: *Das Judenstaadt* and combed the pages of *Commentary* magazine that featured 'gritty' articles on the development of a Jewish life in Palestine.

My political life was influenced by three professors, while attending night college of Sir George Williams College. One professor, a Unitarian minister, spoke of his work to aid the Canadian citizens of Japanese descent, who were forced from their homes in B.C, and imprisoned in remote camps in Canada's interior. I learned that injustice to any minority threatens the liberty of all and eternal vigilance is the price of liberty for all.

*Escape from Freedom* by Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm made

clear to me why people embrace an authoritarian figure, when they can't handle their freedom to think for themselves. They lose all sense of self and find comfort in surrendering to "group think." I thought of this book in the past few days, as I watched Donald Trump seize the Republican nomination for President while proclaiming, "I will make America great again."

Douglas Burns Clark, my literature professor, helped me understand the principle behind world affairs. We were reading the history of the Peloponnesian wars, between Sparta and Athens. An Athenian general visits a small island people who wish to be neutral in the war.

The general rejects their plea, and says: "In war, the strong do as they will, the weak suffer as they must."

I often thought of that statement, in the years of the "cold war" conflict following World War II. Neutrality was not possible. This was brought home to me in the following incident. My friend, Arthur, graduated from McGill School of Social Work. He applied and was accepted for a good position in New York, and was astounded when his request for a visa was denied, because his wife had signed an "Aid to Russia" document when Russia was our ally in the war against Germany. It took time but this impediment was removed. A few years later a communist friend approached me and ask me to sign a petition to save the Rosenbergs (the Atomic spies) from execution. The fear of 'big brother' USA limiting my future travel and my thoughts proved to me again that 'the strong do as they will, and the weak suffer as they must.'

**WENTRICK**  
**REPERCUSSIONS** MAY 11, 1993  
 THE NEW YORK TIMES  
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 THE NEW YORK TIMES

# The Gazette

**Referendum totals**  
 YES: 58%  
 NO: 42%  
 YES: 58%  
 NO: 42%

## NO: 58%, YES: 42%

### No let Quebecers finish the job: Ryan

**BY MICHAEL RYAN**  
 Ottawa (Gazette) — The federal government should not let the Quebec referendum results stand as a final decision on the province's status, a senior government official said today.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the government would not be satisfied with a simple majority in favor of remaining in Canada. He said the government would want to see a clear majority in favor of remaining in Canada.

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A majority of Quebecers of all languages and regions voted yes in the referendum, but the results were not a final decision on the province's status, a senior government official said today.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the government would not be satisfied with a simple majority in favor of remaining in Canada. He said the government would want to see a clear majority in favor of remaining in Canada.

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**INSIDE: SPECIAL SECTION ON REFERENDUM**  
 Pages 21 to 30

**It's not easy to swallow: Levesque**

**The story goes**  
 Jean Charest, leader of the Parti Québécois, said today that the results of the referendum were a "great victory" for the province. He said the results showed that the majority of Quebecers wanted to remain in Canada.

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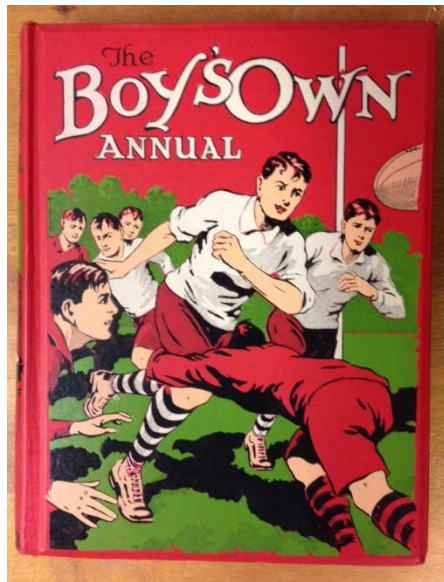


## A Gentleman of Great Expectations

Like Pip, the hero of Dicken's novel *Great Expectations*, I wanted to be a gentleman. On the other hand, my father's expectations of me when I was born two years after my family emigrated to Montreal, was that I would grow, like him, to be "shomer Shabbos" (strict observer of the Sabbath,) the Kosher laws and a "Talmud Chochem" (devoted student of the laws of Moses).

Stories from *The Boy's Own* and *Triumph* penny magazines from the UK press strongly influenced me, from an early age, to be a 'gentleman'. Even though the settings for most of the stories were centred on English school boys in boarding schools, I, a ghetto child, identified with them. I learned to cheer the modest hero upperclassmen and shun the actions of the

bounders like 'Billie Bunter', who cheated at games, ate forbidden sweets ravenously, and didn't treat the lower class men with kindness.



My heroes, the Upper class men, taught me valuable lessons in my youth, which influenced the direction of my life. I learned that a gentleman is judged by his actions, not by what he says. Foremost actions for a gentleman are: respect for contemporaries, whether young or old. A gentleman is modest, never brags and is a true friend. A gentleman never lies and

accepts the consequences of his actions. It did not bother me that I was not a sports hero like so many of the boys I admired. I took comfort in the fact that a gentleman does the best that he can and accepts the results with a smile.

I believed that a gentleman should be well-informed. Books and magazines were my constant companions, from the day I fell in love with the first printed words I read: “See Dick, see Dick run, run Dick run.” My grade 1 teacher encouraged my reading by gifting me with a pile of easy readers for my summer reading.

The ‘Y’ library, after school hours, provided an array of books and magazines. I read *Time* magazine weekly for world news, and *Commentary* magazine monthly for Jewish issues and Israel news. The Encyclopaedia Britannica was often opened as I searched for background information on issues I had encountered in the magazines. At the same time, I was reading the latest books the library displayed on the subject of Zionism, the war and Canadian issues. I was particularly drawn to biographies of world leaders, from Churchill, Roosevelt, to Hitler and Stalin. Post war, I read the diaries and writings of the military leaders that led us to victory, and devoured books analysing Israel’s battles in the Sinai 1956, the 6-day war of 1976, and the war of 1973. In the aftermath of Sadat’s historic visit to Israel, I became an advocate of the “2-state solution”, and I remain an advocate to this day.

In pursuit of my goal to be an educated gentleman, I drew up a list of attitudes and accomplishments that I believed would mark me as a gentleman. Knowledge of classical music was near the top of my list, starting with the three “B’s” (Bach, Beethoven and Brahms}. I was a regular at the ‘Y’ music appreciation nights. One friend, from a musical family, held similar evenings at her home. Saturday afternoons, found me in the music department of Eaton’s Department store. On my request, I was handed a symphony album (78 rpms) and entered a small private

listening booth where I sat on the floor and listened to the glorious sound from a great record player. When I was done, I returned the album and thanked the clerk for the privilege of “previewing” the album. In addition, two years of music theory studies with Mr. Harrison, (my High School teacher, who also directed me in *HMS Pinafore*) gave me a solid foundation to appreciate classical music.

My love of singing led me to buy a guitar when I was 18. I taught myself 10 chords and was able to sing 100 folk songs in English, French, Hebrew and Yiddish. I was never shy about meeting new people because my reputation as a folk singer opened doors for me in many diverse circles, Zionist, synagogue, labour and ski-shack.

I debated in competitions. I used the training I received from singing and acting to use my voice effectively. I researched and prepared my speeches carefully, so that I could “say what I mean, and mean what I say” convincingly.

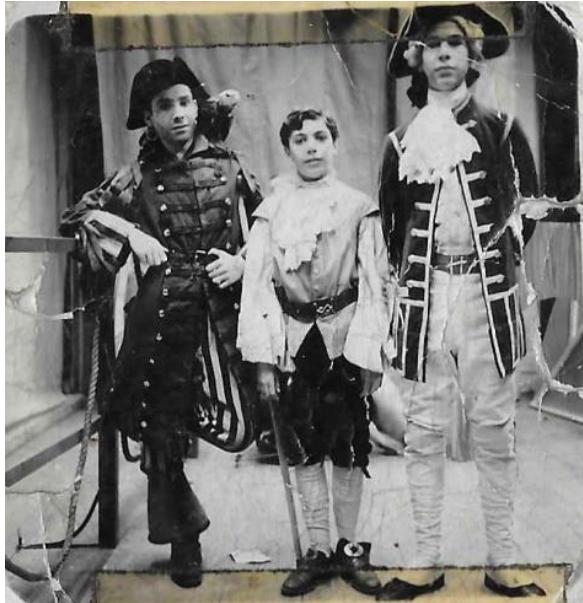
The world of Art was first available to me in the YMHA library. There were large bound volumes of world art and illustrations. I discovered that representational art, whether scenic or portrait, appealed to me most. I was drawn especially to the Dutch artists’ portrayal of everyday life. Later in life, I was privileged to visit some of the great museums of the world: Louvre, Hermitage, Van Gogh, and Picasso. I once signed up for a series of lectures and gallery visits on non-representational art. I did not “get” it then or now.

When the dating game started at age 16, I learned from my friend Joe how a true gentleman acts in those situations. Our social club of 16 year-old boys decided to invite a girls’ social club for an evening of dancing and refreshments. We dressed and combed carefully and eagerly waited for the girls club to arrive. After a brief, awkward moment of greetings, the boys invited the

girls to dance. The prettiest girls were approached first, then the others. When everyone was paired, there was one shy girl, sitting and with head bowed, looking into her lap, when my friend Joe, the tallest and handsomest boy in our group, walked up, smiled, and asked her to dance. Joe spent the rest of the evening dancing and talking to the shy girl, who was soon smiling broadly and animated in conversation. I realized that I was seeing a true gentleman in action: one who puts respect for feelings of others before selfish personal interests. I told Joe that I admired him and hoped to follow his example in the future. Like a true gentleman Joe declined the compliment and said that he had not done anything unusual. I often thought of Joe in my future relationships.

## On Stage

Re-reading the above, I give the impression that my life played out on one note of serious study only. This was not so, because my 'Y' family embraced me and sustained me in a variety of ways that shaped me for the rest of my life.



My admiration for Zangwill, one of the youth workers, who wrote swash-buckling plays and acted in them as well, led to an invitation to me to read for a part in *Treasure Island* in which he was to star as the pirate, Long-John Silver. I read and got the lead of the young Jim Hawkins opposite Long-John. What excitement... to play opposite my real life hero... to be directed by Rose, an experienced, talented and caring professional. I loved every part of the experience, even the long, repetitive hours of speaking the lines and walking through the stage positions. I learned it takes gallons of perspiration, and endless practice to achieve the impression of “spontaneity” or “natural movement”. Rose also taught me how to use my voice, how to project a “whisper” to the far sides of the auditorium and how to

“listen” to the other players, which was even more important than what lines I spoke. Rose also shared her love of drama with me, directing me to read great plays she had seen and introducing me to actor friends we met at ‘Malabar’s’ Costumiers when we went to be fitted for our costumes.

We were a hit! Beautifully staged and costumed, the thrilling sword-fights when the “good-guys” and my character, Jim Hawkins, attacked the pirates and won, brought the house down to thunderous applause. Interestingly, 20 years later, when I moved from Montreal to Ottawa to start in business, I met the Jewish and non-Jewish communities of Ottawa via 3 plays that I appeared in: the *World of Sholem Aleichem* presented at the Jewish Community Centre, the *Caine Mutiny Court Martial* and the *Tea House of the August Moon* at the Ottawa Little Theatre. In a relatively short time I was able to integrate into a new life and a new business in Ottawa.

In June of 1939, I was in need of money. My father told me (via my mother) that he could not afford to send me to high school because there was a tuition fee of \$2.50 payable on the first of each month. I told my mother not to worry—I got a job checking coats at the ‘Y’ from Monday to Thursday, from 7 p.m. –11 p.m. I checked coats in the small checkroom adjacent to the big auditorium. I also worked on Sundays from 10 a.m.–5 p.m. I don’t recall how much I was paid, but it was enough to look after my school dues and my clothes, etc.

An important, though fringe benefit to checking coats, was my presence at the back of the auditorium providing me an opportunity to view every drama, concert, recital or important mass meeting. I saw every important drama of the ‘30’s and ‘40’s; some ran 6 to 10 days to the point where I knew some of the dialogue by heart. Some of the “soon-to-be-great” performing artists gave concerts in the auditorium and my appreciation of the Arts grew with every opportunity.

My opportunities to earn more money grew when I was asked to lead the Sabbath services of the Jr. Congregation. For several years, I sang as the volunteer Cantor of the Jr. Congregation and now I was invited to lead (play the role of “Rabbi”) and to be paid as a part-time staff member. It felt natural to do this and I served in that role for several years.

## Acting and Singing

I was the “Ugly Duckling”, at least that was my first acting role in grade 6 at Bancroft Public School in Montreal. I made an impressive debut, running onto the stage, shouting ‘quack, quack, quack’ while wrapped in a duck costume from head to foot. I received my first acting critique from my carpentry instructor. Looking with a critical eye at my sloppy “mortise joint” he said: “Sternthal, stick to acting.”

My first singing role was with the YMHA junior choir at age ten. I previously explained my motivation for joining was to avoid standing outside the ‘Y’ in the winter cold and snow late on Saturday afternoons. The door opened only for choir members when they arrived to rehearse the Havdallah (end of the Sabbath) blessings and songs. At sundown 400 children rushed in to take their place in the auditorium to listen to the choir sing the blessings and songs, play games, watch movies, and enjoy treats on the Jewish holidays.

Professor Rosemarin, a distinguished-looking man with long hair, was our instructor. Soon after I joined, the professor gave me a solo and soon after other solos. I enjoyed the practice times and learned many tips on breathing and enunciating. Now, eighty years later, I can still sing and recite the blessings for the Havdallah from memory.

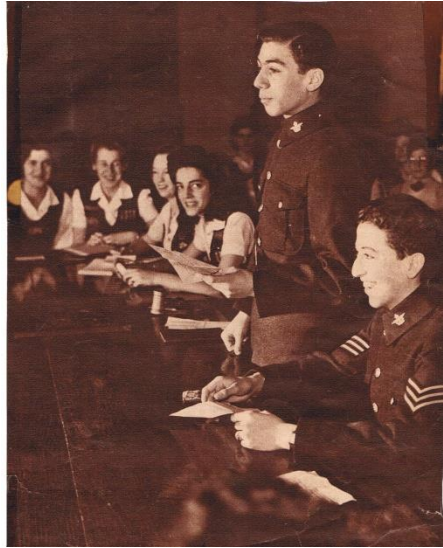
When I was 12, I started to attend the Junior Congregation Sabbath services, presided by Willie Suschat, a McGill student, who played the role of Rabbi. Soon after, I was invited to sing the Cantor’s part, and four years later, when Willie graduated from McGill, I was invited to play the role of Rabbi and Cantor, and received payment for my singing for the first time.

“Youth has no future in Flanders.” This anti-war slogan was painted in large red letters on the fence of my high school just



days after the declaration of war in September 1939 and greeted me and my fellow students on the first day we started our high school studies. I couldn't make sense of that message. Why would anyone not support the war to stop Hitler from conquering Europe? That was my first encounter with communist propaganda, but more about that later.

High school days were busy days. First, were the hours spent drilling and parading in our smart blue Air Cadet uniforms. Studies in meteorology, geometry, and shooting at targets in the basement, would prove useful when we reached the age of 18 and enlisted in the air force. We practiced democracy by electing a student parliament. When the votes were counted, I



was declared "Prime Minister" of the student parliament. I soon learned how difficult it is to arrive at a consensus on any issue, when everyone present defines the issue under consideration in their own terms. I learned to define the issues in narrow terms before presenting them for discussion and vote. In later life, I found that exercise useful when weighing my options before embarking on action.



“I am the ruler of the Queen’s navy!” I sang this song as Sir Joseph Porter KCB, grand Admiral of the fleet, when I visited the ship: HMS Pinafore. What fun working with our music teacher, Mr. Harrison, to bring this famous Gilbert and Sullivan operetta to the stage of our school. It appears no expense was spared, and beautifully costumed and staged, with a full orchestra, we presented a rousing performance of *HMS Pinafore*.

Zangwill, a youth worker at the Y, was my hero. Each day I went directly from school to his office where I made myself useful by bringing him coffee, arranging chairs for meetings, stapling information notes, or just observing Zangwill listening to young people or interacting with colleagues. I was impressed to learn that Zangwill wrote plays and stories, and was overwhelmed when he told me he was going to play the role of Long John Silver in a Y production of the play *Treasure Island*. I was speechless when he said that he had recommended me to play the lead part of young Jim Hawkins. Each day of the next two months was magical. The scenes where Jim Hawkins and

Long John Silver were alone on stage required long hours of extra rehearsals. I was proud that Zangwill treated me as an equal. In the final fight scene I was overwhelmed by Zangwill's masterful sword play, while hobbling about on one leg and a crutch. We were a success as the curtain came down to thunderous applause.

One year later, Zangwill again favoured me, by choosing me to be his assistant-counsellor at an experimental Farm camp, the Y was setting up on a primitive farm some four miles from the US border. Groups of 15 children would spend two weeks on the farm, with no running water and no electricity. A regular camp program was integrated with farm life. It was a learning experience for campers and counselors alike. We pumped water for our needs, milked cows (sort of), made huge bonfires, went to bed at twilight and rose when the sun appeared. We were charged with establishing a blueprint for a large Y summer camp which was in the planning stage. I shared every experience with Zangwill, except from certain private parts of the letters he received from Ruth, Zangwill's secretary at the YMHA. The next year, Captain Zangwill shipped overseas and saw action in the Netherlands. When he returned, he and Ruth were married. Thirty years later, I was in Montreal to attend the funeral of a relative. At the chapel, I prepared to sign the condolence book, when I read the notice of the prior funeral of Zangwill Godlovitch. My eyes were misty. I sat in the Chapel but my thoughts and images were full of those wonderful days when my pal, my guide, was a beautiful guy called Zangwill.

## **Ben—My Best Friend**

I met Ben when my family moved from Cadieux Street to Villeneuve Street. Ben's family lived at the corner of Villeneuve and St. Urbain Street, a block away.

It wasn't long before we were inseparable buddies. I loved going to Ben's house and spending hours on games or just 'hanging out' with my best friend, Ben. His home was so different to my own. It was noisy, vibrant, and entertaining. Ben's mother ran a seamstress business in the front parlour of their home. Ladies (her customers) came for try-ons and stayed to chat. Sometimes their conversation turned to Yiddish songs, led by Ben's mom's lovely voice. Ben's father owned a bakery. He always came home with the pastries that did not sell, to the daily enjoyment of Ben and me. Some evenings, a clan of Ben's relatives invaded the house, eating, drinking, and then, stripped to their undershirts, they played a loud game of cards.

This was such a contrast to my home. My mother and father only interrupted their silence to quarrel. My sisters, Eve and Yetta, were three years and five years older than me, and my older brother, Julius, was eight years older. We took our meals individually and only sat together for the two Passover Seders each year. It is not surprising that I went from school to Ben's home, and only headed for my home when his family gathered at their dinner table.

Ben influenced me in many ways, positive and negative. I recall the day Ben asked me to accompany him while he went 'shopping'. When we entered a '5 and Dime' store, Ben walked by several counters, picked up some small items and put them in his pocket!! He then urged me to 'shop' for some small things and walked away. I was stunned. Nothing had prepared me for this moment. I felt my heart beating while I was frozen in place. My inner voice said, "that's not right." I walked slowly to the

door and joined Ben on the sidewalk. We didn't speak, and when we got to Ben's house I said I was needed at home, and I walked away. Ben never asked me again to join him 'shopping'. I don't know if he ever returned to that scene. Our friendship continued as if nothing had happened.

I was a "klutz" at baseball. I couldn't catch or hit the ball very well. It was not surprising, because at that age I preferred to read an interesting book rather than chase a ball. I didn't mind being the last to be chosen in a pick-up game of baseball. I was receiving recognition and praise for my singing and acting at the YMHA. One day, when I couldn't find Ben in his home, I found him in the back yard of his house covered in perspiration. Ben explained that he wanted to be a pitcher for his baseball team. He had painted a target on the fence, and was pitching to hit the target with consistency. This went on for weeks until Ben reported, with pride, that he was the new pitcher on our school team. I was impressed. I learned from this episode, that if you want something badly enough, and are prepared to practice and practice again, you will reach your heart's desire.

# 1944 to 1951

## My First Job

In 1945, when I was 18, the 'Y' suffered from a shortage of staff due to all the young men being in the service. The Board approached me and asked if I thought that I could fill the staff role of Director of Jr. & Juv. programs. There were some 1500 children enrolled in this division.



I would have to plan a program, present a budget to the Board for hiring necessary part-time leaders, and supervise these leaders in the implementation of the program. The prospect of doing all this did not scare me....after all, this is what I had been observing and helping the staff for the past 10 years. I did it with the help of some of the older staffers who were still around.

Within a year, the regular staff people were out of the service and back at their jobs. That year I had been attending the second full year of studies for my B.A. at Sir George Williams College, and now I was happy to be doing one job at Sir George rather than two jobs at the same time.

I was 19 and at that moment I thought I knew exactly where I was going for the rest of my life. I was going back to university to complete two more years for a B.A. degree, then I was going on to McGill School of Social Work to get a degree in Social Work so that I could continue my work as a professional Community worker, similar to my heroes such as Zangwill, Jules and Harry who had mentored me over the past 10 years. I had no idea that I was about to start a painful and confusing 8 years

of my life. Even now, I would rather not write about that time because of the painful memories it brings back, but if Michael and Adam read this someday, I will take comfort in the thought that they will learn to avoid the serious errors in judgment that I made at that time.

The big question I faced: how can I make lots of money and get out of the ghetto and stop feeling poor and powerless? To explain why this question suddenly became central to my life, I will have to tell what happened in the last few months of my work as a professional ‘Y’ staffer.

I was approached by Matthew, one of the older staffers, to sign a petition to the Board of Directors of the ‘Y’ demanding more money for salaries plus other benefits. I thought the demands of the staffers (my mentors) were justified and I signed. The Board, a voluntary group of successful businessmen, were not happy to receive an organized “threat” (as they saw it) and sent one of their number to see each signer with a demand that each signer scratch his signature. I was dismayed to see my “strong” friends and colleagues collapse and scratch their names. I refused, but as I was the youngest and part-time, my refusal was overlooked without comment. I was confused. I believed that when I became a professional community worker I would join the other workers in shaping minds towards building a better world. What I saw instead was that we had little influence or power and when confronted by the Board, the professional workers submitted meekly to the power of the Board.

## **The Dress Business**

At this point, while being disappointed in the weakness of my colleagues, my older brother, Julius, returned from the service, ready to take up civilian life again. Julius was a “cutter” in the trade that made ladies’ dresses. He started working in our Uncle Ben’s dress factory when he was 15 years of age because we needed his salary to survive as a family. Now, age 28, he was back in civilian life when somebody suggested that he should start his own dress manufacturing business and that Max would be a perfect partner to sell the dresses and to look after the books. (I was a graduate of the Commercial High School Business Program). I agreed and thus made the first serious mistake of my life.

I knew nothing about the dress business (though I had worked as a “shipper” in Uncle Ben’s factory for one year after I finished high school). Julius knew only a limited part of the business, i.e. cutting dress material, ready for someone to sew the pieces into a dress. I borrowed a total of \$3,000 from three of my rich uncles. We hired someone to build a large cutting table which was assembled in the large room in our home, where my Bubbie (grandmother) had lived when she was alive. Uncle Ben donated the pattern for a dress which my brother cut up, which was sewn by a lady in her home.

Armed with this first sample under my arm, I got on a street-car and rode to a business street with several ladies’ shops. I went into the first store to show my sample and to ask the owner to order some of these dresses.....that was my intention.....but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out! I froze. I suddenly realized that I knew nothing about the proposition that I wanted to offer. I thought, why should a man who had spent years in his business listen to me, a person who had no experience to share, and on top of that, couldn’t even speak! My business career could have ended then before it started, except for the fact that



that kind man said: “Take a deep breath. Now tell me what you came to say”. I gratefully did as he said. I don’t recall if I made a sale to him that day but I certainly did on subsequent visits.

After writing orders in several shops, we now had to have the dresses sewn so that I could deliver them to the stores. Not having enough money to hire sewers in a factory of our own, I found myself carrying large bundles of cut-up dresses to women who sewed them in their own homes. I was appalled at what I had become - not a leader of men striving for a better world, but rather an organizer of “sweat” labour from poor women who sometimes worked under poor conditions in their own homes while looking after their children. This went on for almost 3 years and I hated every moment, from the time I opened my eyes in the morning until I closed my eyes to sleep. At the end of 3 years, we had not made any money, but we had not gone any further into debt either. I urged my brother to go back to Uncle Ben’s factory and I assured him that I would find a new direction for my life. I confidently told him that I would repay the debt we owed to our uncles though I did not have a penny to my name.

Michael and Adam, I hope you are asking me at this time: “Poppa” why did you do this thing that made you so unhappy?”

Listen to my answer—listen well—it may prevent you from making a serious mistake in your own lives.

The most important thing I learned from this mistake is never do something because it’s going to make “lots of money”. I have read the biographies of hundreds of successful men and women and I found the key to their success could be summed up this way: even if they were not paid anything, they would still do this thing because of the joy of doing it, because of the excitement of discovery that grew each day, and because even humble, repetitive, ‘housekeeping’ details were worthwhile because they

supported the achievement of ultimate goals. Some people did make money or achieve fame, but that was not the reason to undertake their work, rather a fortunate result.

Another lesson I learned along this line was the meaning behind this expression: “It is a labour of love”. I asked myself to explain this expression: “Do you love it because you ‘labour’ over it, or do you ‘labour’ over it and then as a result, you learn to love it?”

What I learned is that there are no short-cuts to meaningful work. There is no satisfaction that lasts from winning something with a quick roll of the dice, by chance.

Michael, I once heard you say when you were quite young, that you would like to be a professional hockey player, so that you could make “lots of money” and only have to work half the year and vacation the other part of the year. I said the same thing when I went into the dress business without thought, without experience of the everyday, without any love for what I was doing, except to think of the MONEY that would come my way. I hope you boys will find ‘labours of love’ in your lives. If you are not so fortunate, I pray you will understand that true success only comes to those who are prepared to master the hundreds of tiny, unglamorous details of the thing you do, so that your decisions along the way are based on hard-won personal experience and not solely on “inspiration-of-the-moment”.

When you read in the newspapers or on TV about the great sports “stars” or business successes, please look behind the story to the time in the beginning, when hour upon hour of solitary practice of the fundamentals was done without anyone except their own ‘love of the thing’ spurring them on. I hope that money and fame, if that’s what you want, will come your way, but remember what your Grandpa learned the hard way—do what you do for the right reasons: It’s a labour of love which you

would do for the joy of the thing before any other consideration.

I was now 22 or 23 years old. I assessed my situation. I did not have a job or money. Fortunately, I was living at home and my dear mom was feeding me and even giving me a few dollars so that I could ride the street cars or buses when I searched for a job.

There was one positive thing I could say: I had my B.A. college degree after going to night college, 8 hours each week, summer and winter, for three years.



Nobody told me of the importance of 'finishing what you start'. This came from somewhere inside of me and has remained as a rock fundamental in my life. I was proud of myself for the hundreds of hours of attending lectures in the evening after a hard day's work in the dress business (sometimes I fell asleep in my chair), but I finished what I started, and that gave me

confidence that somehow, somewhere, I would find the direction in my life that would be meaningful and satisfying to me.

To my dear boys, I repeat the lessons I learned the hard way, because I love you and would do anything to keep you from hurt or harm—even at the risk of boring you by my repetition.

Give yourself a chance. The world you are entering is so much more technical, computerized, and sophisticated than the one in which I had to make my way. Prepare yourself! Study seriously! Master whatever you undertake! Don't be satisfied with a general idea of what you are about; know the details and specifics down pat. The people or organizations that will employ you will be satisfied with nothing else... and if they don't get it from you they will get it from others who are more serious.

## Membership Secretary

Well, to get back to my story. I was 22, I had a B.A. and I was looking for direction. At this point, my 'Y' family came to my rescue again. The 'Y' was expanding. A huge, new building was under construction in the Snowdon district of Montreal. The 'Y' supported itself financially through the membership fees each of the 16,000 members paid. Each year there was a huge campaign, involving hundreds of volunteer canvassers, who went to the membership and got them to renew. I was offered the job of "Membership Secretary". I would have to organize these hundreds of volunteers through dozens of meetings and mailings, and bring in the million dollars of the campaign objective. This was a new aspect of 'Y' life for me, not in programming and education, but rather in the business end of the 'Y' work. I was not sure I could do this, even though I had completed 4 years of a Commercial High School course, but I needed a job and I intended to give it my all.



My objective was clear. Renew the membership of 16,000 and make the budget of 1 million dollars. I read the files of the previous year campaigns and based on what I learned I started my work. Shortly after I started, I came to work one day and looked at my 'daily' file folder that was filled with papers to a depth of 5 inches. I was frozen. I didn't know where to start or what to do with a memo or letter after I had handled it nor did I know how to find that piece of paper the next day or next week, so back it went into the overflowing file folder on my desk. I

was in trouble. Neither school nor anyone prepared me for this. I thought of a solution—one that remained with me for the rest of my life. My solution—ask for help!

I approached the Chairman of the volunteer Steering Committee. Bud was a successful businessman, but he had a very brusque manner and was not well-liked. Nevertheless, I approached him and asked if he would help me to get organized to do the job at hand. He seemed pleased that someone would ask his help and sat down with me and in a few hours he taught me how to organize and maintain an efficient office routine. We sorted through the dozens of letters and memos in my file. Those that needed an immediate answer went into my daily file. Every other note was read and assigned a future date when it would be handled. In the meantime, this date was noted in my diary and the note was then filed in one of 31 daily folders for the month, or one of 12 folders that were headed by the months of the year. Once my files were organized, I positively enjoyed coming in to work each day, reaching for my diary and daily file, to tackle the necessary events of the day without a worry that I had forgotten or overlooked something of importance.

I also learned two valuable lessons. First, don't pretend you know when you don't. You may be able to con (lie to) some people, but you will be found out sooner than later with the consequence of humiliation or worse. Second, don't be afraid to say "I don't know". Ask for help. You will be amazed how helpful people will be if they are approached with respect. My work prospered and Bud became a frequent visitor, interested in my progress, and always ready to offer help when I encountered a new problem. Everyone on staff was amazed how well we got along and wondered how I 'tamed' the brusque, sometimes rude, Bud. They didn't believe my secret when I told them, "I asked for his help".

I want to tell you about Bill, a staff person a few years older than I. We were sitting with important Board members at a meeting. One Board member asked: How many of our 3000 teens come to the “Y” at least once a week? Quick as a flash Bill replied: 70%. I was amazed at his prompt reply to a difficult question. When we left the meeting I asked him when he had researched the answer in anticipation of the question. He laughed, winked at me and said: “I made it up”. I was shocked at his dishonesty.

Later I was not surprised to learn that Bill, who was studying for a Master’s degree in Psychology, was cheating on his clinical laboratory experiments with rats, which was to form the basis of his Master’s Thesis, and the basis of his being awarded a Master’s degree for “original scientific laboratory study”. Several times a day, the rats were run through a maze and their learning progress was carefully noted with a stop-watch. Bill was courting his soon-to-be wife and had no patience while his rats ran the maze. He was anxious to meet his fiancée so, (he told me) he prodded the rats with his pencil and hurried them along, not caring that he was invalidating the test data and presenting tainted data as the real thing. I liked Bill and so did everyone else. He was a charming rogue. I was happy when he left, because I knew that a charming con artist would never make a reliable or caring colleague, and that he was bound to hurt many trusting people along the way. He came to a sad end. Many years later I heard that he had committed suicide. I was sorry to hear that. I remember his infectious laugh and charm. I also remember my resolve to be “straight”—because I realized, that the worst sin a con-man commits, is that he “cons” himself and robs himself of the chance to become a real person.

## **I Loaned \$10 to Saidye Bronfman**

On a brilliant day in May 1950, I stood on the bottom step of the newly-built YM-YWHA building, waiting to greet Saidye Bronfman, Honorary President of the YWHA (wife of Canada's wealthiest Jew). I scanned the street looking for a chauffeur-driven limousine, and didn't pay attention to a taxi that stopped before me, until I saw Saidye Bronfman get out of the cab. When I greeted her and offered to escort her to the waiting ten ladies of the "Inaugural Tea Committee" she said: "Mr. Sternthal, could you lend me \$10.00 for the cab fare. There were no cars available at my home, so I called a cab to bring me to this meeting with the ladies of this committee." I gave Saidye the \$10. and she sent the cab away.

I confess I use the name 'Saidye' because that is how the ten elegant ladies of the Tea committee constantly referred to Mrs. Sam Bronfman, during the three months of planning for the "Inaugural Tea," one of many events planned to mark the opening of this magnificent new building.

I was Membership Secretary of the new "Y" and one of my staff roles was to record meetings of the various committees. I was under the impression that these ladies were personal acquaintances of Sayde Bronfman, because every reference to her was preceded by the name "Saidye."



When we entered the meeting room, I was surprised when the ten ladies, jumped to their feet and in one voice exclaimed, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Bronfman!" For the next half hour every report was addressed to Mrs. Bronfman, not once did I hear the name 'Saidye.'



I was sitting beside Mrs. Bronfman, and I sensed that she was unhappy about the extravagant and costly plans of the committee.

When the last report was rendered, Mrs. Bronfman addressed the ladies with this rebuke, “Ladies, you seem to have forgotten that you are spending public funds, and as a result, frugality is the rule.”

She then turned to me, and instructed me, as follows: “Mr. Sternthal, go to the Quebec Liquor store. They sell gallon-jars of white wine. Each jar will give you 30 drinks. Buy as many as you need. Then visit Pegroids shop. They sell biscuits by the pound. There are about two dozen to the pound. Buy as many pounds as you need.” She then got up, and to a chorus of “Good afternoon, Mrs. Bronfman” I escorted Mrs. Bronfman to the door and into a cab for her return home.

One month later, I received a gilt-edged invitation to attend a special party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Bronfman, Belvedere Road, to celebrate the opening of the new YM-YWHA building. Enclosed with my invitation was a \$10.00 bill. When I entered the Belvedere mansion, I was graciously greeted by Mrs. Bronfman, and then ‘rubbed shoulders’ with Mayor Camilien Houde, Principal James of McGill University, and many distinguished guests.

When I got home, the words, “Noblesse Oblige” came to mind. I opened the Oxford dictionary to find this meaning: “the moral obligation incumbent on rich or noble people to act generously and honourably.” I thought the definition described Saidye Bonfman perfectly.

## **I Love to Sing**

In order for me to tell you the Bernard story we have to go back to the time when I was 18 and working on the ‘Y’ staff as Director of Jr. & Juv. Division. Bernard was a lawyer, in his mid-thirties, who shared my office because he was hired to be the director of Adult Education programs. He greeted me politely when he came into our office in the morning and when he left at the end of the day. We really had no other conversation until the day he asked me why I had made a decision re room scheduling that affected his programs, without consulting him. I gave him a short answer, saying in effect, “You were not around when I was asked for a decision. You will just have to live with it”.

He said nothing more, but when I went to bed that night, I found it difficult to sleep because of the thoughts swirling around in my head. I thought that I was wrong not to have consulted with Bernard before making a decision. Even more important: he was older than me and I owed him a more respectful answer than the short answer I had given him. The next day, when he entered our office and politely said: “Good Morning”, as usual, I turned to him and said: “You were right and I was wrong. I should have waited to consult with you. I’m sorry. It will not happen again”.

Bernard looked at me wide-eyed, and did not speak for a moment. Then he said “It’s very big of you to say that and I do appreciate it”. He sat at his desk and started his work, and no more was said. A week later Bernard turned to me and said: “I accepted a leading part in a Purim ‘spiel’ (play) but I must drop out because I will be out-of-town on the performance date. I have recommended you to play and sing my part. Would you agree to go?” I agreed, and that night made my way to Temple Emanuel on the other side of the mountain in Montreal.

I was to sing the part of Mordecai in the Purim story and I had two rehearsal opportunities before the performance. I worked hard and delivered a good performance on the day. My singing impressed the Rabbi, who asked me if I would like to sing in the Temple choir (for payment). I also impressed three ladies of the committee who arranged an audition for me with Madame Donalda, a famous opera singer and now voice coach. She agreed to work with me after I sang the scales, singing each vowel sound from the lowest note to the highest I could reach. She encouraged me by saying, after I sang a pure vowel sound: “Richard Tucker could not have sung that any better!” As Richard Tucker was then a world-acclaimed opera singer, this was indeed high praise. However, 4 weeks later, she disappointed me terribly. Madame said she could not work with me any longer. I could not read music. She urged me to study with a music teacher, and when I could read, to please come back and continue my voice lessons with her. As I was working at the ‘Y’ and also going to University, I was unable to do this. My musical career, however, did not come to an end then.

Encouraged by such a professional assessment by Madame, I resolved to develop my interest in singing. I bought a guitar and learned a repertoire of folk songs in many languages. I taught myself how to strum various chords, but I relied mostly on my voice to deliver the songs. My friends and I went skiing most weekends in the Laurentian Mountains near Montreal and I was in demand as a singer of folk songs and as a sing-song leader.

Some years later, (I was living in Ottawa at that time) some friends invited me to come to the Laurentians to sing at the engagement party of one of my friends. The ski-shack was packed. I found a spot on the floor and played and sang for my friends as I had done for several years before. When I finished, I turned and spoke to a pretty young woman who was seated on the sofa directly behind me. Two months later, we were married. Yes, Michael and Adam, that pretty lady was your Grandma and

because of my singing, we met, married, had three beautiful children,

and now two beautiful grandsons.



Don't you agree that it is amazing, that this beautiful story had its origin because I happened to meet by chance a man called



Bernard! I tell you the Bernard story because it taught me something important that I share with you: You are responsible for the direction your life will take. You must study seriously and work to the best of your ability. Notwithstanding, there is

something Jewish people call “Mazel” or good-luck which presents opportunities, often well-disguised, which can change the direction of your life. You will have encounters with thousands of people in your lifetime, some fleeting, others lasting. We never know which of these encounters will open the door to some new direction. I resolved early in my life to treat every person I met with respect and to deal honorably with all who crossed my path. If you go through life with the certainty that every person merits respect, you will be repaid many times by the respect (and affection) you will receive from the people you meet in your daily life.

Michael and Adam: I wanted to skip the next part of my story because it is a painful story of a foolish mistake. However, if it can help you avoid a similar mistake in the future, I will feel it is worthwhile. So here goes.

# 1952 to 1955

## A Foolish Mistake

After two years at the ‘Y’ as Membership Secretary, and running two successful campaigns, I happened to read a magazine article about a man in Cleveland, Ohio, I think, who made a lot of money by selling dresses through a catalogue which he placed in the hands of housewives of farmers and fishermen who acted as his sales agents in small-town America. I thought: “I can do that”! “I know something about the dress business, and I’ve learned all about writing and printing from my ‘Y’ experience, plus I know how to organize and run a business. I will sell the idea to my Uncle Ben to supply me with dress samples and then to make them when I get orders from the hundreds of saleswomen I will recruit”. I painted an enthusiastic picture to Uncle Ben who agreed to go along, and soon after I gave up my “Y” job and launched into a new career.

Boys, do you see anything wrong with this story, based on what I told you previously in this letter? You may remember that I said: Know every detail about what you are doing. Make decisions based on personal experience. Don’t be blinded by the thoughts of how much money you are going to make. Like (hopefully) love the thing you are going to do as a daily routine. Well, as you can already guess, I didn’t do any of those things.

I did work with models and photographers and printers and produced a catalogue. I did place ads in the Family Herald Magazine and recruited 100 women, wives of farmers and fishermen who were eager to act as saleswomen to their



neighbors in small-towns and villages in Canada. I eagerly brought the first dozen orders to Uncle Ben to produce them in his dress factory. He looked at the orders for a long time, then turned and went into his factory.

A few days later I returned to pick up the finished dresses and to bring orders for another couple of dozen, when Uncle Ben reluctantly gave me the bad news. He could not continue in this business with me. He was used to cutting 50 dresses of the same size at the same time. I was bringing him orders for one or two of a size and it cost too much to make these items individually. He didn't realize what he had gotten into, he was terribly sorry, and I was out of business almost before I got started. I spent the next 6 weeks writing to all my salespeople, explaining why I couldn't supply, returning money that they had trustingly sent me in advance.

I had plenty of time while doing this to berate myself, and to think of all the things I should have done to avoid this inevitable failure. I thought that before I ever go into another business, I will work in that business from the ground up to the top. I will personally experience every part of the work, so that my decisions will be based on fact, not on my imagination. I resolved to save money, so that I would be using my own capital instead of relying totally on someone else to put up the money and to take all the risk.

## Bookkeeper

When I had faithfully written and returned money to all my “sales people” I stopped at the cafeteria of the old ‘Y’ to ponder my next move. Reva, a girl from my class at Commercial High School some eight years ago, passed and asked me what I was doing. I told her that I was looking for a job, any kind of a job. She told me that she was a Bookkeeper, but that she was leaving her job in a month to get married and that she would be leaving Montreal to go to her husband’s new job in Calgary. Reva also told me that she was the third woman to leave her employer for the same reason, and that her boss now wanted to hire a man to be his bookkeeper. When Reva suggested that I apply, I reminded her that it was 8 years since I had studied bookkeeping. Nevertheless, not having any immediate prospects I persuaded myself to apply and to my surprise I was hired by Judy at a salary of \$50 a week.

I knew that I was not qualified to do this job, so I called Reva and offered her \$25.00 per week to come to the office after hours and teach me how to do this job. She agreed and every day after Judy had gone home at 6 p.m., Reva came in and reviewed everything I had done during the day, corrected my mistakes, and taught me how to prepare for a “Trial Balance” which was a proof that everything that had been posted during the month was done correctly. I would then give this “Trial Balance” to Judy which was, in effect, a report on the state of his business.

At the end of the first month, with Reva’s help, I completed my first Trial Balance and it was accepted by Judy. Reva then left Montreal as she had planned, and I was on my own. I worked days (and well into the evenings) all month to prepare the Trial Balance on my own. I submitted it to Judy who was pleased with the report. He was very surprised to hear me say that I was quitting, and that he should start looking for a replacement. In answer to his question, I told him the truth: that I did not like



bookkeeping, that I had been coached by Reva after hours, that I had stayed an additional month to prove to myself that I could do the job, that I must look for something that had meaning and excitement for me.

Judy's reaction shocked me. He told me that he too was unhappy in his work and that he was looking for a new business opportunity that would be more meaningful to him. He suggested, that if I had no definite direction at the moment, that I stay on the job until he made a new connection which might interest me as well. I agreed.

## RUSCO Windows

Within two weeks, Judy was chosen from 50 applicants to be the exclusive dealer for RUSCO Windows and Doors in the Montreal area. I helped Judy find a run-down store front and warehouse on a busy street, and two weeks later I left my bookkeeping job to start a new career in the Window and Door business.



As this was a brand-new business, Judy said he could only pay me \$25 a week to start, but if I made a sale, he would pay me a 15% commission on top of my salary. I agreed and plunged into work: cleaning, painting, setting up an office and bookkeeping system, ordering signs and telephones, etc.

A short time later, I learned that a friend's 'in-laws' had bought a new home, and I arranged for Judy to drive me and my window samples to their new home in the evening. I demonstrated the benefits of the new Steel windows and screens, answered questions, measured the windows and presented a contract which was signed, my first order! On the way home, I realized that I had earned \$100 commission—equal to 4 weeks salary in my office job.

I threw myself enthusiastically into selling. We had not yet

started advertising for prospects, so I looked about me for potential prospects and found many: the Bell Telephone man who came to install the phones, the sign painter, the corner coffee shop, the postman—I arranged to visit their homes in the evening, and made several sales. At this point I told Judy of my intention to give up the office work and to devote my time entirely to sales which I was enjoying very much. Of course, I would need a car of my own to continue my sales work. Would Judy lend me \$400 to buy a car to be repaid out of future commissions? He didn't hesitate and I bought a used English car called an "Austin". I loved it! The back seat carried all my samples and materials and it even had a sliding roof! Within a month, I made enough sales to repay the \$400.

Even though we started newspaper advertising, leads were slow in coming in. The RUSCO people told me that the best way to get leads was to knock on doors and offer homeowners information about this new idea---Steel Combination Storm and Screen Windows. I decided to follow this advice, so I chose a street of nice homes and knocked on each door. After I had spoken to 100 homeowners, I designed a system to get the maximum number of invitations to enter their homes and to demonstrate my product. I printed a card which read "Invitation to view a 12-minute sound film in the comfort of your home". I presented 30 of these invitations to housewives at their doors in the morning. In the evening, when their husbands were home from work, I returned and knocked on these same 30 doors. I usually got 4-5 invitations to come in, to project the 12-minute color film-strip and to play the coordinated record which explained all the benefits of changing their old windows for new windows. I followed up with a demonstration on a window sample, measured and priced their windows, and sold an average of 2 out of 5 demonstrations. This "knock-invitation" system was soon copied by the sales staff I hired and trained, and eventually was used by all RUSCO salespeople in Canada.

I was happy in my work and I was making good money. Soon after, Judy asked me to train our first new salesman. “Let him accompany you. Make a sale. Give him the 15% commission to encourage him to start. I will pay you an extra 3% on top for your help in starting a new man”.

I really did not like taking time off my own sales, but I was grateful to Judy for the opportunity he had given me, and I wanted to repay the favor. Thus, I trained the first man, then the second, third and fourth. I was also involved frequently when the men I had trained came to me for help in making sales. At that point, I sat down with Judy and told him that he had to make a decision. Either I continued with my own sales efforts without interference of sales training of others, or I would devote myself entirely to sales training and building a sales force of 12 men. I would be paid 3% commission on top of the 15% paid to the salespeople on each sale made. I told Judy that though I was making more money now from my own sales, I enjoyed the hiring and training very much, and eventually the 3% “override” commissions would catch up and exceed my own commissions. Judy was pleased to accept my offer and I was appointed “Sales Trainer” of the company. Within 2 years, I had trained and put 12 salesmen on the road and I was earning \$10,000 a year, a lot of money in 1954.

The first thing I did with my savings was to pay back the \$3,000 I had borrowed from my uncles some 8 years before. Looking forward to 1955, I anticipated increasing the sales staff to 18, buying a new car, and enjoying the fruits of my work that gave me daily pleasure and satisfaction.

## Communists & Communism

Communism was associated in my mind with Russia. In 1936–1939 it ranked favourably in my mind because Russia was backing a “common front” by the democracies of the world against Fascism. In particular, it was the only country supplying arms to the Spanish Republicans against the Fascist Franco.

I spoke to an actual communist for the first time when I was 13. I was sitting on the steps of my home, attempting to play my guitar and sing a Spanish song, “Los Quatro Generales” from a recording made in Madrid, punctuated with the sound of cannon fire from the advancing Franco forces. A man stopped, listened and approached me.

“Do you understand Spanish?”

When I said “no” he explained. Los Quatro Generales were 4 Franco generals who were marching on Madrid, but the fifth general was inside Madrid. The term “5<sup>th</sup> column” to designate a traitor in the ranks came from this situation.

He then identified himself as a member of the International Brigade, composed of volunteers from all democratic countries. His group was the Canadian, Mackenzie-Papineau group, and he had just returned after fighting for the Republic in the past two years.

I said: “The civil war is over and Franco rules Spain. You must be glad to be out of there and back here.”

His eyes teared as he straightened up and said with emotion, “We did not want to leave. We were ordered to leave. 800 comrades and I marched through Madrid to the cheers of the crowds. We had difficulty marching because we were crying. We loved Spain.”

He was silent for a moment and then said: "Spain will not die. The Fascists will be defeated. Sing their songs. Viva Espanya!" He then turned on his heels and walked away.

I respected that man. In later years, whenever I met communists, I liked and respected them. My feelings about their belief in communism, however, changed as often as the "party-line" imposed on its members changed, e.g. before the war, communists were strongly for a "common front" of all democracies against Hitler. In 1939, after the Hitler-Stalin pact, the war was now an "imperialistic" war for the benefit of the British Empire. After Hitler invaded Russia in 1941, the war was a holy war now, to save democracy in the world. 10 million Russians died before Hitlerism was defeated. Soon after, the "hot" war turned into the "cold war" that affects our politics to this day.

My second encounter with a communist occurred in the second season of the YMHA summer camp, where I was one of four



counsellors. What a difference this camp was to the last. Situated on a modern farm in Repentigny, 20 miles east of Montreal, it had every amenity: running water, electricity, meals in a modern three-story building, where campers and four counsellors occupied the second floor for sleeping, and the first floor for dining and meetings.

The owners were a new Canadian couple from Estonia. Their nephew from Estonia lived with them. We seldom saw the owners. The man, in a well-fitted suit, left the building each day for Montreal. His wife, elegantly dressed and coiffured, seldom left the third floor of the building where they lived. They were obviously not farmers or so inclined.

Adya, their nephew, looked after the everyday operations of the farm and supervised the care and milking of 10 cows in the modern barn adjacent to the big house. Adya was cheerful and fun to be around. He showed interest in the camp activities and joined the counsellors on our nights off, drinking in the local taverns. I recall one occasion when Adya, after a few drinks, spoke about his previous life in Estonia after it fell under Russian rule.

He laughed as he recalled, “I called my uncles to a meeting and told them that they no longer owned their textile mills. Those were now Soviet Government property, and I, Adya, their nephew, was the new manager appointed by the Soviet Government. You can imagine how my uncles received this news. I was now their boss.”

That was the end of the conversation as we bundled Adya into the car and returned to camp.

Seven years later, at the height of the arrest and conviction of Fred Rose, my member of parliament for Cartier district, for spying for the Russians, the newspapers daily carried stories of people “brought in for questioning” about their activities regarding Russia. I was not surprised to read that the Estonian couple were arrested at the farm and brought in for questioning. I don’t recall if Adya’s name appeared in the press. Somehow, I felt that Adya probably found a way to work both sides, as he had in Estonia.

In 1944, after Stalingrad, Russians were our heroes, particularly in Jewish circles. As the Russians rolled back the German armies, there were reports daily of towns and cities liberated in Eastern Europe. We hoped that there were still some Jews alive there.

On the home front, I found myself with other 15–16 year olds, on the back of a truck, donated with a driver to support the “Aid to Russia” campaigns. After the truck brought us to a street, we knocked on doors asking for warm clothes to send to Russia. All doors were open and I made many trips with armful of clothes to dump into the back of the truck. One household donated a fur coat. I had just thrown it into the truck and turned to go back for more, when I noticed the young, French-Canadian driver (the trucks and drivers were donated by local business people) reach down, pick up the fur coat and hand it to a young friend who ran off with it. My first thought was to condemn the driver, but my second thought froze any effort to act against him. It occurred to me that I had just witnessed the need of one of our own people, who needed a warm coat as much as the Russians did, but there were no committees caring for our people. Was this stealing? I was 15 and concluded: Not everything is clearly black or white. Some things were even shades of grey.

Soon after Gordon and Scott were listed in the press as “persons brought in for questioning” by the RCMP, they joined RUSCO Company as commission salesmen. Regular employment was no longer an option for them. I was their sales trainer. I respected them, and they respected me when I told them I was not a communist sympathizer.

Gordon was reserved and quiet-spoken, while Scott was ebullient and full of life. One day, Scott volunteered this story. He was arrested in Montreal and driven to Ottawa and held “incommunicado” for several days. He was not allowed to make a phone call, so his family did not know where he was. Finally,



he was seated opposite an RCMP Inspector who asked him questions about his communist connections.

When he was not forthcoming, the inspector said, “Scott, why is a decent Christian like you, mixed up with a bunch of Communist “Kikes?”(a derogatory word for Jews).

Scott, who was married to a Jewish woman, jumped out of his chair, lunged across the Inspector’s desk and tried to choke the Inspector. That was the end of that interview and Scott’s story. I was shocked to learn that Scott was arrested without charge, driven to Ottawa and confined for days without a trial, denied his right to make a phone call to his family or his attorney. I was disturbed to hear of these violations of fundamental protections we take for granted as Canadian citizens.

One day, Gordon asked me to sign a petition to “save the Rosenbergs (atomic spies) from execution.” He pointed out that prominent people, including the Pope, had signed the petition. I confess, I did not sign the petition. I recalled how my friend Art was refused entry to the states because his wife signed an “Aid to Russia” document (when Russia was our ally.) I was afraid that my future plans to travel or work in the USA could be affected by my signature on this petition. I was not proud of my stand, but I wrote it to indicate the atmosphere at the time.

Finally, a word about Henry, a successful accountant who held strong left-wing opinions, and was a board member of the YMHA and the volunteer chairman of the JR.&JUV. Division, of which I was hired as Director (1944). I was aware of his sympathies, but we never discussed them. Henry represented a type of Jew I was learning about: Well educated, concerned with social justice, and a defender of the Soviet Union as “friend of the Jews.” He would cite the Jewish colony in Siberia (Birobidzhan) as an example of Stalin’s interest in helping Jews to form a Jewish State in Russia. (Most Jews are Zionists and

supported the efforts of Jews to cultivate the “holy” land, Palestine.)

In 1956, Khrushchev made his famous speech in which he confirmed that Stalin was a megalomaniac, that he had ordered the execution of hundreds of the original leaders of the Bolshevik party (including many Jews), that he had ordered the arrest of leading Jewish doctors, accusing them of poisoning the leadership of the Communist Party. This accusation was advanced by Stalin as the prelude to a pogrom against the Jewish population of Russia. His sudden death saved the Jews from annihilation. Soon after, rumours were supported by facts: Stalin had ordered the execution of the Jewish Intelligentsia, and Birobidzhan was exposed as a fraud organized to direct Jewish support away from Zionism, and the entire Stalin entourage was rife with anti-Semitism.

When I heard all of this I thought of Henry and his friends who based their entire world outlook on the premise that communism held keys to unlock the door to a fair and secure future for humanity. I later heard from a mutual friend, that Henry was a broken man. He became rather secluded and resigned from the many clubs and associations he had favoured in the past.

I reflected: I respected the motives that had led so many to embrace Communism as their God, but I hoped that their bitterness would not turn them into cynics who stand by with folded arms and wait for the world to end.

## **I Meet the Godfather**

“Wow! I gasped, as I surveyed a magnificent home perched on a hill, and a uniformed chauffeur who was carefully polishing a black Cadillac.

I tightened my grip on my window sample, nervously cleared my throat, and prepared to meet the biggest challenge in my two-month career as a window salesman.

“My husband will see you shortly,” said the kind lady as she ushered me into the parlour.

Twenty minutes later, Mr. C, wearing a brocade robe, entered the room.

“I want to change the screens on my porch, to permanent windows and screens.”

I took that as a signal to demonstrate the sample RUSCO combination window and screen which eliminated forever the need to change screens to windows with each passing season.

“Good,” said Mr. C, “come to my restaurant this afternoon.”

He went up the stairs to his bedroom, while I measured the porch, calculated the number of combination windows needed, wrote up a contract, then sat down and waited for Mr. C to come down.

As I waited, I reviewed the “closing the sale” techniques, I had recently learned. One: establish the need; two: demonstrate that my product fills the need; three: present the contract for signature. I checked off the first two points, and I would check off the third by presenting the contract when he entered the parlour again.

“What are you doing here?” “I told you to come to my restaurant,” shouted an angry Mr. C as he turned and stormed away.

I was stunned, and then, with trembling hands collected my briefcase and sample, and headed to the door, held open by Mrs. C.

“I’m sorry this happened,” said a kindly Mrs. C. “My husband was upset because you embarrassed him.”

“I don’t understand” I stuttered.

“You asked him to sign your contract. My husband can’t read or write. When you go to his restaurant, his accountant will read the contract, and then he will sign.” That afternoon, I climbed the stairs to the office above the restaurant, where the accountant scrutinized the contract and Mr. C signed on the nod of his accountant’s head.

Two years later, I was looking at a picture of Mr. C in the Montreal Star. Over the picture, the headline read: IS MR. COTRONI THE NEW GODFATHER OF THE MONTREAL MAFIA?



## Hal Banks Threw Me Out of His Home

He poked his head into his living room, fixed his steely eyes on me, and pointing with his finger at the front door, he hissed: “You—get-out!”

Shaking, I gathered my brief case and my sample steel storm door and screen, passed an embarrassed Mrs. Banks at the front door, and then sat in my car in the driveway and tried to make sense of what just happened.

It was the summer of 1952 and I was six months into my career as a Rusco window and door salesman. On this day, I was knocking on doors in the Lakeshore district of Montreal, asking housewives to agree for me to return in the evening to demonstrate the benefits of the door to them and their husbands. (In 1952, Quebec only recognized husbands as authorized to sign contracts).

I decided that I had done nothing wrong, but wondered, “who is Hal Banks?”

The answers were easily obtained by the daily newspapers and rumours of all kinds. For example: Hal Banks was an American felon, who was invited to enter Canada in 1949, to set up a rival seaman’s union and destroy the “communist-dominated” CSU (Canadian Seaman’s, Union), then the dominant union on Canada’s waterfronts.



Accounts of broken arms and legs and pitched battles between Bank's new union, the SIU, and the CSU filled the newspapers. By 1952, the CSU was destroyed and Bank's SIU ruled the waterfronts of Canada.

In the summer of 1953, I was surprised to receive a lead to see Banks at the SIU headquarters on the Montreal waterfront. Banks' SIU office was the size of a small auditorium. Banks was seated behind a huge desk that held three ringing telephones, a row of 6 chairs in front of his desk, and 20-odd chairs and a coffee-station near the back wall. Seamen were entering and leaving, or sitting and talking and drinking coffee.

Banks pointed to the 6 chairs in front of his desk and indicated for me to sit there. He told me to measure all the wood ventilating windows and to replace them with RUSCO steel combination storm windows and screens. I measured 20 windows, calculated the cost, prepared a contract and then returned to my chair in front of Banks' desk. I sat there for the next hour watching Banks speaking to people on the phones from the east to the west coast.

I was close and could hear most of what Banks was saying in his strong, loud voice.

I remember one conversation to someone in Vancouver that went something like this, "Sven, I just got a call from Carl. He tells me that two of their guys have come to the docks with a satchel full of money and are spreading it around. Look after that."

One hour after I sat down Banks beckoned me to come forward. He studied the contract, asked about the delivery time and signed the contract. As I drove back to the RUSCO office, I couldn't help smiling as I contrasted my departure from Banks' home with my departure from his office with a fat contract

In 1962, Banks was finally brought before a court and found guilty of directing a vicious crippling attack on a Captain of the CSU. Banks did not waste time before he left Canada and disappeared.

For the next three years, newspapers carried stories that the Federal Government, the Labour Congress and shipping interests (they had welcomed Banks entry to Canada) could not locate Hal Banks, until an intrepid reporter announced in headlines, “I found Hal Banks with one phone call.”

A photo of a smiling Banks relaxing on the deck of his yacht in the New York harbour, was displayed beneath the headline and story. It was clear that the forces that brought Banks to Canada were embarrassed and had made no effort to find him.

My last connection with the Banks story was a result of a book I read in the Ottawa Public library: *Transcript of the Hal Banks Trial*. Imagine my surprise to learn that Maurice W. was the prosecuting lawyer. Maurice W. was a member of my B’nai Brith lodge!

I called and asked him, “Weren’t you fearful for your life?”

“No, I was always under the protection of the RCMP.” he said.

While writing this account, I cast my mind back to understand why I was ordered out of Banks’ home in 1952. The only conclusion that made sense was that Banks was in the middle of a life- and-death struggle at that time. When he was surprised to see a stranger waiting for him in his living room, he probably thought I was part of a plot to harm or kill him.

# 1955 to 1958

## RUSCO Ottawa

One day Judy called me to his office. He told me that the RUSCO people wanted him to expand his business to Ottawa and look after that city as well as Montreal. He refused their offer on the grounds that Montreal was growing at such a dizzy pace that he could not consider an Ottawa operation 120 miles from Montreal. However, Judy told them: if Max wishes to move to Ottawa, and manage an Ottawa branch, we will open an Ottawa office.

I told him that I was content with my life in Montreal as his sales trainer and that I had no interest to go to Ottawa as his employee. I would only consider going to Ottawa if I was his partner. He paused and asked: "If you want to be a partner, you have to invest money (capital). Do you have any money to invest? You would need \$3,000 to acquire a 30% share."

I told him that I didn't have \$3,000. (I had just repaid my uncles.)

I said: "If you want me to go, you will give me the \$3,000 I need to buy my share. Let me explain. I am earning \$10,000 annually now. Next year, it could go up to \$15,000. If I go to Ottawa to start a new business, I will be giving up all that money in exchange for a starting salary of \$5,000 annually. It's only fair for you to give me the \$3,000 I need to buy my partnership share".

Judy said nothing for a long while, and then asked for a day to think about it. The next day he greeted me with a handshake and said, "Good Luck, Partner". I was once more on the road to start a new business!



I felt confident. I knew every detail of this business, from the office work, to the ordering and installation. I had successfully knocked on doors, designed sales programs that worked and made sales. And I was investing my own money, and not depending entirely on someone else to put up all the money. I put my Montreal affairs in order, bought a larger, nearly-new car, said my farewells, and on February 14, 1955, I left Montreal.

I was a little nervous as I drove over the bridge at the west end of Montreal Island.

“All my worldly possessions are in this car,” I thought. “In the trunk I have my clothes, my sales samples and my guitar. In my pocket I have a cheque for \$10,000 to open a RUSCO OTTAWA bank account after I locate a place for an office and warehouse, in a city I visited recently for half-an-hour, and where I do not know anyone.”

I took a deep breath and prayed that my first day on the road to my new life would go well and smoothly, and... BAM!!!—my nearly-new car ground to a halt, one mile from the bridge I just passed! I recalled that there was a garage just after the bridge, so I turned up the collar of my coat and walked through the falling snow to the garage. The garage mechanic drove me back to my car and towed it to the garage. I don't recall how I spent the next 3 hours while my car was being repaired, but I am sure that I was not a happy camper.

When I got back on the road at 3:30 in the afternoon, I decided to drive to Cornwall, about a two hour drive. RUSCO Manufacturing had given me some leads from a magazine ad they had run recently and I thought that I would call on them and then proceed to Ottawa. I reached my first lead just before 5 P.M. I was surprised to find myself in front of a store on Cornwall's busiest business street instead of a residence. An elderly gentleman looked up when I entered.

When I introduced myself and gave him my RUSCO card, he startled me by barking: “I didn’t ask for a salesman. I only wrote for your company to send me a brochure”.

I swallowed hard, and then said with a smile that I would be happy to provide the brochure, but I felt that I could serve him best by examining his window problems at his home, and showing him working samples of the RUSCO window system. I had come from Montreal and was available that evening. He thought for a moment, then gave me a card with his home number and told me to come at 7:30 that evening. He received me politely when I came to his home, viewed my 12-minute film, closely looked at the window sample, and then accompanied me around his house while I measured his many windows.

Back in the living room, I told him that I was on my way to Ottawa to start my own window company, and then I presented the contract to him with these words: “Mr. Chevrier, I would like you to do me the honor of being the first customer in my new business”.

I handed him my pen to sign the contract, and then I “shut-up”. (I had trained all my salesmen to “shut-up” and say nothing more after they presented the contract. It was now up to the prospect to act). Mr. Chevrier looked down at the contract for a long, long, time. It felt like hours and I could feel the sweat rolling down my face as I sat and waited. Finally, I thought I saw a smile on his face. He signed the contract! I thanked him, and he graciously helped me carry my samples and sales equipment to my car. When I opened my trunk he spotted my guitar and asked if I played.



When I told him of my interest in folk-singing, he asked me to bring my guitar into the house and summoned his wife and children to hear me play and sing. You can imagine how happy I was at that moment and I gave them a concert they remembered. Years later, whenever one of my staff called on them in Cornwall, they always sent regards and inquired if I was still singing.

I drove to a hotel and before falling asleep, I reviewed what I had learned from my first day in my own business: Work from a plan, but be prepared to encounter surprise bumps in the road. Do your best, and then get back on the plan. Don't get discouraged—remember "it's not over, until it's over". The next day, I called on the other leads I had obtained from RUSCO. I got some promises to buy in the future, and in the late afternoon I got on the road to Ottawa.

I got to my room in the Lord Elgin Hotel shortly before 8 P.M. Tired and hungry, I sat on the bed and flipped the pages of the Ottawa newspaper I had bought in the hotel lobby. My eyes fell on an ad that headlined the fact that YEHUDI MENUHIN, one of the world's foremost violinists, was giving a concert at the

Capitol Theatre that evening. I jumped up, flew out of the hotel and 3 blocks later, was at the cashier's booth, asking to buy a ticket for the concert. The cashier looked at me as if I were crazy, and said: "Sir, we have been sold-out for months". I turned to go back to the hotel and walked across a deserted lobby, when a woman ran out of the theatre, came up to me and asked: "Do you want a ticket to the concert?" When I nodded, she thrust a ticket into my hand, and then turned and ran back into the theatre as the lights flickered to indicate that the concert was about to begin. I found my seat in the dark and settled back to hear one of the most exciting concerts of my life. At intermission, I discovered that I had been given the ticket of the sick sister of the lady. She refused payment and I thanked her for making my first day in Ottawa such a memorable one. The next day, following up on an ad in the paper, I sublet the remaining three months of an insurance company's office space. I ordered business cards and contracts with my new address, arranged for telephone service, and walked into the most imposing Bank building on Ottawa's main street and asked for the assistant Bank Manager. When I presented my \$10,000 cheque to open my RUSCO bank account, he took me to see the Bank Manager, in his huge office with floor-to-ceiling windows. The Manager was very warm in his greetings and I was soon telling him about my background and my hopes and dreams for the future. He encouraged me to visit him, and I did from time to time when I went to the bank to transact my business. I will tell you later what an important role this Manager played in my business life.

The next day I went to my office to start work. The insurance people had promised to leave a desk and chairs and a filing cabinet for me to start my work. Imagine my chagrin, when I found 2 backless wooden chairs and a telephone stand in place of a desk. They had even removed the light bulbs from the sockets! Oh well, another bump in the road. I got to work and soon

organized an office I could use.

There was going to be a delay of 2–3 weeks before I received my telephone service. I solved that problem in a unique way. A bright and modern restaurant had recently opened across the street of my office. I was soon eating my three meals a day there, and was a familiar figure to the cashier, waitresses and the owner, who became a long-time friend. When the cashier heard of my problems with Bell Telephone, she volunteered to take my calls on her telephone; thus, after a few days in business I had a private secretary, for free!

There was another amusing story regarding my daily visits to the restaurant. Murray, the manager-part owner, was experimenting with food ideas for his menu and I was his favorite guinea-pig. Many evenings, he would insist on ordering dinner for me to test my reaction to the different dishes the Chef prepared. One day he presented me with a steak accompanied by 4 different preparations of potatoes! My poor mother would cry on the telephone, “What are you eating with no one to look after you?” After three months of Murray’s experiments, the truth was that I gained ten pounds!

One week into my business, I advertised in the paper for a salesman. I interviewed the applicants in the restaurant because I did not think I could favorably impress anyone in my shabby, little office. I actually hired two men, and got a promise from a third man, to join me in three months’ time when his present job was completed. I took the two men out to a street in Ottawa, knocked on doors, made appointments and made some initial sales for them... I was in business!

After two weeks of living in a hotel, I realized that I had to make a move to a permanent home. I saw an ad in the Ottawa paper: “Young business executive wishes to share large, furnished flat”. I called and arranged for “Irving” to meet me for dinner at the

restaurant to discuss this possibility. I didn't like or trust Irving the moment I saw him. He was flashily dressed, sported a huge diamond watch, and bragged about his Cadillac convertible. I didn't know how to get out of this situation, but I agreed to go in his convertible to see this flat. Irving parked on a wide boulevard and pointed out that the Tower of the Parliament Building could be seen over the nearby rooftops.



The flat was certainly “centrally located” as he claimed in the ad. We walked up one flight of stairs to the flat which was over a used-furniture store on the ground floor. Mr. and Mrs. Levesque, the landlords, lived on the third floor and were waiting to show us the flat. It was spacious, with 2 bedrooms, fully furnished with furniture from the store, and Madame would supply fresh linens and towels every week. The rent was \$150 per month, and a one year lease was required.

I thought that I could be comfortable there, but I was unwilling to sign any long-term commitment, especially since I did not trust Irving. I put \$75 on a table and told Irving that was my first month's share of the rent, and if he matched it, I would continue on a month-to-month basis, but I would not sign a lease. The landlords were unhappy but refused to let us leave, and they took the \$150 on the table, and told us we could move in the following day. When I returned in the daylight the next day, I realized that the grand boulevard near the Parliament Building where I was to live was, in reality, the Farmer's Market of Ottawa. Wagons and stalls full of farm produce lined the curbs of both sides of the grand boulevard. That night, after I moved in, I discovered the other secret of this boulevard—it was the

gathering point for most of the prostitutes and drunks of Ottawa!  
Oh well, another bump in the road.

I only got to the flat to sleep because I was working 12 hours a day to get my business going. I hardly encountered Irving, which was a good thing because of my feelings about him. I drove to Montreal each weekend to see family and friends, and to inform Judy of my progress in RUSCO OTTAWA.

## Irving—the Con Man

Before the third weekend in the apartment, Irving told me that he was throwing a grand cocktail party in the flat. He had engaged a caterer and waitresses, who would provide food and liquor for dozens of Ottawa's finest young people, and he insisted that I skip my visit to Montreal and join the party. I reluctantly agreed. On Saturday, at noon, Mrs. Goldfield, a widow who made her living catering to parties, arrived with 2 of her waitresses, carrying countless bundles of food and drink into the flat. They prepared all afternoon, and in the evening, it appeared that half of Ottawa came up the stairs to our flat, to eat and drink at Irving's invitation. I was introduced to some, but I got the impression that Irving hardly knew most of the guests. In the early morning, the party ended and I went to bed.

I didn't see Irving for a few days and didn't realize that anything was wrong until I received a phone call from a tearful Mrs. Goldfield, telling me that Irving had disappeared and that he owed her \$150 for the food and waitresses she had provided. I enquired at the jewelry store, where he told me he was managing a chain of jewelry shops. They did not know where he was and informed me that he was not the manager of the chain, but was a recently-hired sales clerk! In the following weeks, I was visited by officers of various police forces and the Bailiff of the County who wanted to repossess (take back) the Convertible, because Irving had stopped making payments on the car, after the first few payments. Each day's mail brought overdue bills and threatening letters from all over the country. The worst part was when people who had seen me with Irving came up and asked: "Where is your friend?" This upset me very much: I was trying to establish a new business with a reputation for honest, straightforward practices, and now I was asked questions about my "friend" wanted by the police, bailiff and Mrs. Goldfield.

One night, after working another long day, I was awakened by



loud knocking on my door at 1 o'clock in the morning!  
Frightened, I called through my locked door to demand to know who was there.

The answer was: "I'm the Bailiff. I saw you go in. Open the door!"

I opened the door, and the Bailiff told me that he was watching the flat for days and that he was sure that Irving had just gone up to the flat. I told him to come in and search, which he did. He apologized profusely, so I invited him to stay for a cup of coffee and conversation, as I was not likely to fall asleep now. He told me amusing stories of chasing deadbeats such as Irving and then I told him about my window and door business. He expressed interest to know more, so I showed him a sample, whereupon he invited me to his home, at my convenience, to give him prices for new windows. I did the next day and made a sale, a happy ending after an unhappy start!

Some weeks later, Irving opened my door with his key, and greeted me casually, as if he had just gone out to buy some cigarettes. He offered no explanation and went into his bedroom to change from the silk shirt he was wearing to another one from the six silk shirts that were hanging in his cupboard.

He was about to leave, when I stopped him, and said: "You are either the biggest fool or the biggest crook I have ever met, but you are not leaving here until you give me \$150 for Mrs. Goldfield and another \$50 for long distance calls you made on our telephone. Pay me now, or I will have the Bailiff and officers from the various police forces here in a minute".

Irving started to whine: "Everyone picks on you when you are down". But he pulled \$200 from his wallet, threw it on the table and ran out of the flat. A joyful Mrs. Goldfield came to my flat the next day to collect her money and blessed me for 'a 120

years’.

I searched all over Ottawa to find an office and warehouse for my new business, because I was aware that my three months lease would soon be over. I was unsuccessful because Ottawa, in 1955, was suffering from a severe shortage of Business and Residential property. I had an idea and I went to see the landlord of my flat. After Irving left I told the landlord that I would pay only my portion of the rent, \$75, or I would leave the flat. He took the \$75 and I stayed. Now, at the start of the third month, I offered to pay him the original \$150 monthly on the condition that he include the use of a large, solid, wood shed behind his building which would do nicely as my warehouse. He agreed, and I quickly converted all the rooms in the flat into office, display, and sales rooms, retaining one back bedroom for my own use. RUSCO OTTAWA was now established in the middle of Ottawa’s busy market street!

## Early Challenges

Within 12 months, I hired and trained five salesmen, one receptionist/bookkeeper, and a window installer who came with his own truck. I worked night and day and was pleased with the increasing sales. Imagine my disappointment when my Accountant informed me after closing my books for the year-end statement, that I had lost \$15,000! Judy, on his first visit to Ottawa, asked me if I wanted to quit, close down the business and come back to my old job in Montreal.

I firmly answered: “No way, I don’t quit. I have done everything right except for one mistake. I will correct that mistake, and in one year we will make back the money I have lost”.

The one mistake was that I had set our selling prices too low in my anxiety to get established quickly. I increased my prices by 10% and one year later, I recovered all the money I had lost. I assessed my situation: two and a half years after arriving in Ottawa, I had not made any money (or lost any money), but I had an aggressive sales organization that was making an impression on the Ottawa scene. I was confident as we faced the future.

Soon after, I went to see my friendly bank manager to ask him for a personal loan of \$2,500. In answer to his question regarding the purpose of this loan, I told him that I was getting married in two months’ time, and that I needed to buy a diamond engagement ring, a diamond pin for my Bride on our wedding day, and a two week honeymoon in Mexico. I continued, “I don’t have any collateral (something of value, like a house, that I could pledge to the bank if I failed to pay back my loan) or a “Guarantor” (a person of means who would guarantee to pay the bank if I failed to pay). I knew I was making an unusual request, because the bank did not lend money without a “Guarantor” or collateral. However, I felt that the Manager trusted me based on

our many conversations when I described how I was working to establish an ethical business in the window industry that had a reputation for dishonest practices. He granted me the loan on my sole signature.

After your Grandma and I were married, we moved into a small apartment, near Rockliffe. The first week, I handed Grandma a cheque for \$200 and told her that was the salary RUSCO paid me each week. Grandma was pleased and said that we could live comfortably on the \$200. I then told her that we owed \$50 a week to the bank to pay off my debt for the wedding, honeymoon etc. Grandma was a careful manager of our money and one year later we paid off the bank debt, as I had promised.

The ten years that followed were busy with a growing family and business. Your Aunt Sandy was born, followed by your Uncle David, and then you're Mom. RUSCO moved after a year to a large office/warehouse building, where we grew in sales and reputation over the next 10 years.

# 1958 to 1964

## Engaged on Third Date!!

“Did you really get engaged on your third date?”

Over the years, that question has been posed by my children, grandsons, friends and some people that I had just met.

Yes, it was our third date, actually, the start of our third date. My answer is met with expressions from astonishment to “you’re not serious, are you?” I will relate “how” this happened, but please don’t ask ‘why’ this happened. In the past sixty years I haven’t fixed on one final answer.

Late in March 1958, I drove from my home in Ottawa to my friend’s ski shack in St. Sauveur, Quebec, carrying my guitar. I was keeping a promise to sing and lead sing-songs at my friend’s engagement party.

The ski shack was overcrowded. I found a spot on the floor, leaned against a crowded sofa, and soon the ski shack was rocking with song, the beer was flowing and everyone was mellow. At the end of my ‘concert’ I turned to see whose bare knees I had been leaning on. Yes, the bare knees belonged to a very attractive, Phyllis, wearing a pair of flannel shorts in the ski-shack! Our conversation was brief; she was not committed to anyone, and she agreed to meet me for dinner the following night in Montreal.

We went to the Tony Ritz Café in the Ritz Carleton Hotel to dine and dance. Conversation flowed easily, and we spent most of the evening talking. When I drove Phyllis home we had agreed to spend the next weekend skiing at my friend’s ski shack.

We spoke every evening on the phone and on Friday I drove my

Mercury convertible to Montreal, picked up Phyllis and drove to St. Sauveur. We skied and we talked candidly with each other. I was 31 and Phyllis was two months shy of her 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. We both spoke freely and openly about our expectations in our future lives.

As we drove to Montreal on Sunday evening, I told Phyllis that I would be back in Montreal on the following Thursday, the day before the start of Passover. I hated the twisting 2-lane road between Ottawa and Montreal. Could Phyllis keep my car at her home while I rode the train to Ottawa and back, and meet me at Union station on Thursday late afternoon. Phyllis agreed and was pleased with my offer for her to drive my car in the time I was in Ottawa. She smiled broadly and confessed that she was in love with my convertible.

We spoke every evening until Thursday. There was a flower shop near the Ottawa train station and I bought a bouquet of Talisman” roses in a box before getting on the train.

In the Montreal train station, I ascended the escalator to the main floor, carrying the box of roses. At the top of the stairs, Phyllis was waiting. We kissed and I handed the roses to a pleasantly-surprised Phyllis.

We were very comfortable with each other as we laughed and joked. When we reached the corner of Girouard and Cote St. Luc, I was telling Phyllis how much I missed her, and then added, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Phyllis nodded and then asked in a quiet conversational tone, “Does that mean we are going to get married?”

I replied in the same quiet manner, “I guess so.”

I then suggested dinner at the Wine Cellar of Ruby Foo’s Restaurant.



In that romantic setting I proposed and was accepted. We toasted each other, posed for photos, and then phoned our respective mothers with the news.

## Honeymoon

Phyllis and I were engaged on March 3, 1958. June 1st was set as our wedding date as Jewish law set August as the next available date. We opted for the earlier date.



Unfortunately, once our engagement was announced, both our families joined in the fun. My phone calls to my fiancée read like a list of entertainments planned for us on my week-end visits to Montreal. Also, the June 1<sup>st</sup> day demanded decisions such as wedding ring, which synagogue, where to hold the reception, etc. Then there were the problems of finding an apartment in Ottawa,



overcrowded and poorly-housed 13 years after the war. There was simply no time for talks or bonding as we were making decisions about our wedding or feasting as honoured guests of both families every weekend until June 1.

There was a sobering moment in the office of Phyllis' Uncle Hy, a prominent Quebec Notary, who was preparing a Quebec nuptial agreement as his wedding present.

"It is customary to include a cash amount, in the event of dissolution of the marriage. "Is \$10,000 agreeable to you, Mr. Sternthal?" asked Uncle Hy with his pen poised over the document.

I gulped and thought, 'at this moment I don't have 10,000 cents to my name' but I said "yes" confidently, and the document was signed.

The wedding was at the Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue, and Rabbi Shuschat (the same student who served as Rabbi of the Jr. Congregation when I was Cantor) would officiate.

He brought us down to earth when he said: "I hope your wedding takes place on time because I must dedicate a new golf course later in the day."

Leonard Levine was my best man. We checked into the Mt. Royal Hotel the night before the wedding. Next morning, Leonard decided that a hearty breakfast was what I needed, and accordingly, room service wheeled a table into the room, laden with croissants, eggs, bacon, fruit and coffee. My nerves began to show. I could not take a bite or sip of coffee. When Leonard's urgings failed, he dug into his breakfast, and when I still refused to come to the table, he ate my breakfast as well!

The wedding reception was lovely at the home of Phyllis' Uncle

Abe and Aunt Betty. Gordon, Selma's husband, was everywhere, filming the events of the day. Months later, when we got the film, it was no surprise that the star of the film was Selma, his wife.

The next day, we flew to New York to the Tony Ritz Plaza



Hotel, a wedding gift from a friend of my in-laws, including two tickets to the hottest show on Broadway, "My Fair Lady!"

The next day we boarded a plane to Mexico City. We were finally alone. I don't recall any awkwardness, but the reality was inescapable. We barely knew each other, but now there was lots of time to talk about the present and our future together.

I was happy to discover that my wife was a delightful travelling companion, ever ready to explore historical sites, synagogues, bull-fights and things of interest my earlier research had noted.

I also learned that Phyllis was a neat person, and I accepted, with good humour, her suggestion that the floor was not the best place to collect any of my used socks or underwear. It was obvious that we both wanted this marriage to work, so compromise and acceptance were frequent visitors as the days rushed by.

After a week in Mexico City, it was off to Acapulco. After a long drive we arrived in the dark to a “modern hotel” that was not air-conditioned. We did not unpack, but put on our bathing suits and jumped into the pool... OUCH!!... The pool water was also hot! After a restless night, I hailed a taxi and ordered the driver to take us to the most modern (air-conditioned) hotels in Acapulco.



Five miles outside of Acapulco we found our honeymoon paradise, the Pierre Marques. We moved immediately into this luxurious hotel, recently opened as a resort and cruise-line stop. A friendly staff, good food, and a young honeymoon couple from Chicago, combined to relax us completely. Cloudy skies and pleasant temperatures kept us at the pool and beach for long hours every day until we had to face the consequences—severe sunburn! My bride took on the shade of a ‘red lobster’ and moaned from the pain, that she was going to die.

A suave, Dr. Ziloga, who was summoned from town, calmed Phyllis, by stating with a smile: “We do not have cemeteries in Mexico for beautiful ladies like you.” His words and a prescribed dosage of “Abocitra” (Uncle Harry later informed us it was “Bromo Seltzer) taxied from town, succeeded in bringing

comfort to Phyllis, but it was two-to-three days before I could touch her without her wincing.

A week later, we were on a plane back to reality. We landed in Montreal, picked up my car at Phyllis's home, said our goodbyes and got on the road to Ottawa to start our married life. I was driving and Phyllis was looking out the window. After half an hour, I realized that not a word had passed between us. An hour later, still not a word had been uttered. An hour later, when we reached the outskirts of Ottawa, I turned the car up Springfield Road, in the direction of our apartment, and still not a word passed between us.

At the top of Beechwood Road, we passed the Beechwood Cemetery, resting place for many of Canada's great names.

As we drove past the cemetery, my bride spoke to me for the first time, "When I die, send my body back to Montreal. I don't want to be buried here."

The rest of the drive to our apartment was again in silence.

I didn't know what Phyllis was thinking. I wouldn't allow myself to think about her statement or what it implied, so I busied myself with unloading the car and bringing our belongings up to our second-floor apartment. Fortunately, there were soon smiles on Phyllis's face as she rushed about, putting things in place and setting up our home. Only two rooms were fully furnished.

Phyllis had impressed me with her philosophy, "Buy as much as we can afford—but, buy the best."

She was so happy to be independent in her own home.

In the next two months we received many invitations to dinners from friends I had made in the three years I lived in Ottawa as a

bachelor. Phyllis joined the Ottawa branch of the National Council of Jewish Women.

One night I was awakened by the sound of sobbing in the bedroom. I rubbed my eyes and saw Phyllis sitting on the side of our bed and sobbing. My heart stopped. How could I not see that Phyllis beneath that smiling façade, was unhappy?

I finally asked, “What is the matter, sweetheart?”

Phyllis sobbed, coughed and said: “I’m frightened. The ladies of my group in the National Council of Jewish women have chosen me to thank the guest speaker at our lunch tomorrow. I’m nervous. I never spoke in public before. I can’t do it.”

I hugged Phyllis, relieved of all my anxieties about the state of our marriage. This I could handle. I turned the lights on and asked Phyllis to tell me what she knew about the guest speaker and her topic. I then suggested a few sentences of thank you to a guest speaker. Phyllis wrote them down and then rearranged the order. We spent the next two hours as Phyllis practiced her short speech, gaining confidence with each attempt. We then closed the lights as Phyllis slept comfortably in my arms.

The next day a jubilant Phyllis reported, “It went well! Everyone complimented me.”

Five years later, Phyllis was chosen to be chairperson of the National Council of Jewish Women’s Art Show of Canadian artists’ work. This important Art Show would be graced by the presence of Governor-General Mitchner and Mrs. Michener, and covered extensively by pictures and stories in the press.

On the day, Ottawans dressed in their finest (Phyllis in a long gown and I in a tuxedo) came to the grand hall to view the works of Canadian artists and then to bid on the pieces of art.



I was so proud of Phyllis who received the Micheners so graciously and then chatted with them as she accompanied them as they viewed original art pieces from Canadian artists plus Inuit soapstone sculptures, the best of their culture.

In the following days, the newspapers were full of pictures and stories about the outstanding Art Show. I made a collection of those beautiful photos. I was so proud of Phyllis!

## Madame Dionne

The days following October 28, 1959 should have been filled with the joy of bonding with my first-born child, Sandy.

My first glimpse of Sandy was through the window of the hospital nursery as the nurse held up a small bundle. In the days following I only managed brief glimpses because I was on the run each day to pick up visiting parents, in-laws, cousins and friends arriving from Montreal and bringing them to Phyllis' bedside at the Ottawa Civic Hospital. The rest of the days, I was busy scrounging or stealing chairs from other bedrooms to accommodate the elderly relatives who flocked to Ottawa and Phyllis' bedside.

On the tenth day, I was at the Ottawa bus station to meet our baby-nurse, who came bearing glowing recommendations for her nursing skills. My first view of Dionne surprised me. She was a greying, middle-aged woman and her bare arms were covered with blotches. We stopped at the hospital and wheeled Phyllis, holding Sandy, to my car.

I remember gripping the steering wheel, keeping my eyes fixed on the road, as I thought, "Now we are a family, and I must protect this little bundle until she grows up to be a beautiful woman!"

At our home, Phyllis got into bed and I followed Dionne and the baby to the nursery. I was surprised when Dionne said, "Monsieur, sit down."

She then placed Sandy, wrapped in a blanket, into my arms, and said, "Get acquainted with your daughter" and left the room, closing the door behind her.

I breathed deeply, and thought, "Thank you Dionne. At last,

someone understands my turmoil of the last ten days.”

In the ten weeks that followed, Dionne became a member of our family acting as a parent, nurse and friend to Phyllis and me, as we had no relatives in Ottawa. Phyllis was an eager learner and was soon performing her motherly duties like a pro.

When the day came for Dionne’s return to Montreal, I said, “Madame, we want you to return to nurse our next child. When shall I call to book you?”

Quick as a flash, Dionne replied, “As soon as you leave the bedroom, monsieur!”

That was an example of her outspoken, earthy, Gallic manner of speaking. Subsequently, she returned to nurse David and then Karen. At each visit of ten weeks, we learned more about this remarkable woman and her private life.

We learned that Dionne trained as an RN, but was forced to leave that occupation when an unsightly, but benign skin condition, turned away her adult patients. She considered being a chef (she was a great cook) or doing baby nursing. Fortunately for hundreds of babies, she chose baby nursing.



## Introduction to the Jewish Community

When I first came to Ottawa, I had a letter of introduction to a lawyer, Abe Lieff, who was a prominent member of the Jewish Community. (In later years, he was appointed a Judge). I asked him to arrange a business license etc. for RUSCO to start doing business in Ottawa. He agreed to do these things, but he was more interested when he learned that I had sung in synagogue choirs in Montreal. He recruited me, then and there, to join his synagogue choir. I reported a few days later and was positioned to sing next to Joe Lieff (his younger brother and fellow-lawyer) to learn the baritone part of the High Holiday Service. I sang in the choir for three years, and when I married Grandma, the Synagogue gave Grandma a free seat for the next eight years.

At that time, your Aunt Sandy was five years old and we thought it time to join a Synagogue so that Aunt Sandy could go to a religious school and learn about her Jewish identity. Though our first impulse was to join the Synagogue where I had been singing in the Choir for nine years, we actually joined a small number of families (we were the eighteenth family to join) who were interested in forming the first Reform Temple in Ottawa. The other synagogues had very rigid rules about how services, education, etc. were to be done. I was attracted to the Temple because it was a small group that was open to new ideas from the membership. We met in each other's homes at first, then in various rooms of schools, churches and private clubs. We welcomed all Jews to visit and worship with us and slowly grew in numbers and strength.

Shortly after we joined I volunteered to act as Cantor based on my 'Y' experience in my youth, as well as my synagogue choir experience. Without much external help from the Reform movement (which was still young and lacking in staff) I relied almost entirely on my memory of the melodies I had sung at the 'Y' and the choir, and I slowly laid the basis for the service

which I led at Temple for the next 15 years. I was happy to combine my love of singing and Judaism while fostering a joyous relationship with my fellow Jews.

One year after we started, I assisted others in starting our religious school, and Aunt Sandy was a student that first year. My role was to teach the students in different grades to sing the prayers of the service, so that they would feel at home when they attended services with their parents. I served the Temple as Cantor/teacher for 15 years, and when I retired the Congregation honored me with a party and presented me with a beautiful silver Kiddush cup. I was grateful to the Temple for the opportunity to contribute to the building of a strong Jewish Community.

# 1965 to 1980

## **I still choke when I tell this story**

Rabbi Gerber called me at my office in June of 1975 and asked if I could be available to witness the circumcision of three boys who were converting to Judaism.

As I drove to the address of Mr. K's. home, I recalled what had led up to this moment. Rabbi Gerber had informed me that Mr. K., at his first meeting with the Rabbi, stated "I was born a Jew and survived four horrible years of the concentration camp. When I was freed, I turned my back on my Jewishness and vowed if I have children I would never burden them with the Jewish label. I married a French-Canadian woman, and we have three wonderful boys, the oldest is 14, the second 12 and our youngest 10. We were a happy and close family until that day when my oldest son asked: "Dad, what are we? My school teacher asked everyone that question. All the kids in my class answered "Christian." I didn't know what to say, so I'm asking you—what are we?"

Mr. K. hesitated, then said reluctantly, "We are Jewish." He felt relieved that his son accepted his answer without comment. However, the next day, his son asked: "Dad, you said we are Jews, what does it mean to be a Jew?" Mr. K. paused and said: "We don't celebrate Christmas. Jews celebrate a holiday called Chanukah." This information only spurred more questions. Mr. K. kept digging into his past trying to supply answers to his sons' continuous questions about what Jews did and the holidays they observed.

He told Rabbi Gerber: "I made a large Menorah out of wood, wired it with lights and we lit the lights every day for eight days. I even bought a record with Chanukah and Jewish songs. My

boys learned the songs by listening over and over, and now they sing along with the record. There are more questions every day which I cannot answer, especially now when my boys have declared, “We want to be Jewish!”. I have come to ask: will you take them into your school and teach them what they need to know and do to become Jews?”

I recalled Rabbi Gerber accepted the three boys into our school. Their mother delivered them and picked them up at each session. Now, a year later, I was driving to their home to meet Rabbi Gerber and the Ottawa Mohel (a person trained to do ritual circumcisions according to Jewish law). I wondered how the young boys would react to this very serious ceremony. When I arrived at the home, I was surprised to learn that Mr. K. could not attend the mid-day ceremony because he had to work. Rabbi Gerber, the Mohel (Cantor Aptowitzer) and I were greeted graciously by Mrs. K. who was in a long dress and hovering over a table laden with baked goods and wine.

When we went into a bedroom upstairs, Rabbi Gerber told me that Mr. K. had a surgeon circumcise the boys after each birth in the hospital, a decision he made without thinking, even as it contradicted his wish to deny Jewish identity to his children. As a result, the Mohel would perform a “symbolic circumcision” by drawing a single drop of blood and recite all the blessings of a Jewish circumcision. I tensed, drew a deep breath and waited for the oldest son to enter the bedroom.

Rabbi Gerber called him by his name and spoke to him quietly: “You understand what we about to do here? Do you wish to fulfil the commandment? Do you wish to proceed? Tears filled my eyes as he stood up tall and said: “I understand. I’m eager to be a Jew and fulfil the commandments. I’m ready.” The second son then came in and standing proud like a soldier, repeated his wish to be a Jew. When the youngest came in, Rabbi Gerber asked him if he understood what we were going to do, and did he

consent. Like his brothers, he stood like a soldier, and said: “I want to be a Jew!”

At that moment, I was crying and choked up. Looking at this young boy, smiling and standing so proud, I felt that I was witness to an eternal truth: In spite of 2000 years of persecution at various times from a plethora of nations, there is a Jewish present and there will always be a Jewish future.

I followed everybody down stairs, and around a beautiful table prepared by Mrs. K. we joined the boys in singing some of the songs they had learned from records and our school. We then raised our glasses and saluted three new members of our community.

I can’t explain it, but when I came home and attempted to relate to my wife the events at the K. home—I choked up, as I did any subsequent time I attempted to relate this story and as I choked up when I sat to write of that day when three young boys proudly said: I am a Jew!!”

## **I Buy RUSCO**

Around 1970, 15 years after I started RUSCO Ottawa, I discussed with Grandma my desire to buy the 50% ownership that Judy had and to own RUSCO 100% (I owned 50% at that time). Judy would be a reluctant seller because he was receiving profits from the business every year without ever coming up to Ottawa or getting involved in any details, because he trusted me completely. It would take a great deal of money, which I did not have, to reach the figure that he would accept as a “buy-out”. Grandma was very supportive, and promised to be extra careful in our spending, to save money to repay the huge debt we would have to undertake to buy-out Judy. She also volunteered to work half days at the office to save still more money.

I then went to see my friendly banker and brought him all the relevant records about RUSCO. After he studied the records he asked me how much money I would want to borrow to buy the 50% ownership from Judy. I named a very large sum and told him that I would repay it in 3 years, but that I was not in a position to give him any collateral or a guarantor. I realized that I was asking for a loan that was 40 times larger than the loan he had given me some 15 years ago, but I hoped that he would have the same confidence in me and RUSCO as I did. I held my breath as he looked at the documents, then at me.

Then, in a quiet voice he said: “Make your deal, Max. When you need it, call me—the money will be waiting for you!”.

I thanked him for his confidence and then arranged for my lawyer to send a formal offer to Judy to buy his shares in RUSCO at the price I had arranged to borrow from the bank. After nine months of very difficult negotiations, Judy finally agreed to sell his shares, and just as the bank manager promised, the money was waiting for me.

We worked hard, night and day, and were rewarded for our efforts, because I was able to repay the bank loan at the end of one year instead of the three years I had arranged. As the word spread from our satisfied customers, that RUSCO was a company that could be trusted to deliver quality products and service at fair prices, our business grew in strength and reputation in the following years.

February 15, 2000 marked the 45th anniversary of RUSCO OTTAWA. Grandma and I still operate the business.

## RUSCO Business

My first glimpse of Ottawa was on a snowy January day in 1955. I had agreed to move to Ottawa from Montreal to start up RUSCO sales and service, window and door business, and this afternoon was an introductory view of the city I had never visited before.

Gerry, the representative of the RUSCO window company manufacturer, who had recruited me, drove me to the city and down Island Park Drive, a grand divided boulevard with substantial homes.

“Here is your market. This is what Ottawa is like. You will do well here.” We then turned back and drove to Montreal.

In “My Journey” I described my first days in Ottawa. Now I would like to share some of the successes and failures of my early years in Ottawa. Within a month of settling in to Ottawa, I was able to assess my situation realistically.



I reviewed my strengths and weaknesses. First my strength: I



was 28, fit, enthusiastic, experienced in the business from end to end, and determined to succeed. I had capital to start my business and I had made a good impression on the manager of my bank who would be supportive in the future. Lastly, I was in a business that required door-to-door visits, requiring measurements of each window and door before ordering. This meant I was secure from competition from the supermarkets and the department stores that dealt in standard sizes. I took every advantage of this situation.

My weaknesses: I needed to hire and train five commission salesmen (women were not a factor in direct sales at that time). For a 15% commission, these men had to supply their own car and gas, knock on doors in the day time and re-visit these homes in the evening to close sales with the man of the house. The alternative sales jobs in retail stores, department stores, were more attractive than the RUSCO proposition. The result was that I was left with the “bottom of the pile” in my recruiting efforts.

It is not surprising that I attracted my share of men with alcohol problems who drifted from one job to another. What is surprising is that I developed methods to pick and train a core of salesmen who stayed with me an average of five years, contrary to the usual drift to other jobs after one season.

Another hurdle was the fact that the RUSCO Steel windows and doors were, sometimes, double the price of aluminium windows and doors from our competitors. The only recourse was to train my salesmen to sell quality and service versus aluminium and poor service.

This was done by a rigid program of ‘play-acting that I instilled. By alternating customer and salesman roles, each salesman developed a cogent and convincing story of the long-lasting benefits of buying quality. I did not allow any discounting of my

price, unlike my competitors. Customers were assured that everyone paid the same price, and that when they called for service, the salesman who made the sale would be the one responding to their service call. Further, I introduced a program of “free glass or screen replacement” in case of breakage. This included pick-up and delivery by the salesman who made the original sale.

My advertising program was aggressive: newspaper ads, door-to-door distribution of RUSCO literature, and a program of rewarding customers who recommended our product to friends or fellow office workers.

“Win a free RUSCO storm and screen door” promotion was a huge success! Any organization, church or lodge that had a meeting of a 100 people or more, would be greeted in the lobby of their meeting place with a full-size operating RUSCO door. Highlight of the meeting was a draw, and the winner received a free, custom measured RUSCO steel door installed on their home. This popular draw brought us many leads and sales.

The window business had a poor reputation in Ottawa because of disreputable companies and salesmen. I counteracted that impression by volunteering to serve on the board of the Better Business Bureau, a group of leading business people who would aid the public by warning of companies with a bad record or trying to adjudicate contract disputes. I served on the board for ten years.

As I related in “My Journey,” my company lost its investment of \$15,000 in the first 18 months of operation, but recovered it in the next 18 months, and continued to earn increasing profits in the following years. I disregarded comparisons with other window companies, who were shipping ‘truck loads’ of windows, driving Cadillacs and flying their own planes! I was convinced I was on the right track. I was building a solid,

reputable company, brick-by-brick and was recognized by the Ottawa public. In the following years, many of the high flyers went out of business, while RUSCO boomed to the dominant place in the Ottawa market.

In 1967, 12 years after I started RUSCO, I was able to build a lovely, custom-built 2-storey, 5-bedroom home. In 1970, I bought out my silent partners. In 1972, Phyllis and I visited Israel for a month. This was the start of a major trip every year for the next 15 years. I was also able to send Sandy, David and Karen to summer camps in Temogami for 8 weeks. At the same time I was working almost full-time as Cantor of Temple Israel. In 1980, we bought a Condo in Pompano Beach, Fl. From 1985,



Phyllis and I spent the winters in our Florida home.

After 30 years in the business (started 1955) the window business turned rather swiftly from metal windows to vinyl windows. The vinyl windows were superior to metal because the vinyl frames were glazed with Thermo glass (double-sealed) rather than single-glaze in aluminum or steel. Within 5 years (by 1990) vinyl was “in” and metal was “out.”

RUSCO manufacturing converted their production to Vinyl windows but my company lost its previous distinction when they

sold steel instead of aluminum. Now I was just another vinyl window company. The goodwill that RUSCO had in the community served us well for the next 10 years (2000), but after 45 years in business I was ready to retire, which I did soon after.

## **On Parliament Hill**

In 1965, I submitted a bid to a contractor to supply RUSCO steel windows for a proposed new school in Hawkesbury ON (60 miles east of Ottawa). This was the biggest bid I had submitted and I was elated when the contractor advised that he had won the bid to build the school using RUSCO windows.

A month later, my elation turned to anger when the contractor informed me that the architect on the project had advised the school board to reject the RUSCO windows because they were not safe for the children to operate. He said that the RUSCO sliding glass panel acted like a “guillotine” and could fall and injure the students.

I made inquiries and learned from several sources that the architect had a relative in the aluminium windows business, and that he was actively promoting the use of this window to the school board. This was a crooked scheme. I resolved not to be put aside by a crook, so I proceeded to get the facts about the players in this scheme.

I “followed the money,” and learned that the school building was funded by a grant from the Federal Government Department of Education. If more money was required to use the window urged by the architect, the funds would come out of the Federal Government Department of Education budget. I decided that I would make my case to the Minister of Education, Mr. Dick Bell.

I picked up the phone and called the Minister's office asking for a date to meet with him. Two days later, I was on Parliament Hill, speaking with the Honourable Dick Bell.



I persuaded the Minister, that my low bid for windows was pushed aside so that a more expensive window, pushed by the architect could be substituted. The Minister thanked me for coming. Three weeks later, a call from the successful contractor, informed me that the school board was calling a special meeting with RUSCO, the aluminium window company (recommended by the architect) and the architect, to hear submissions about the window quality and performance of the two windows.

I drove to Hawkesbury one evening and when I entered the board room, I presented each person with a file with lists of schools, convents and Government buildings with RUSCO windows, along with letters of recommendation from these institutions. I also demonstrated on a sample window how the spring locks prevented the window panel from slipping. The other company and the architect were also called.

As I was leaving, I heard the architect grumble, "Can you believe this? They were accusing me of being dishonest!"

A week later, the contractor called, "RUSCO has the contract!"

I thought, "What an amazing country, where an ordinary citizen like me can call a minister of the crown, get an appointment and

walk into his office and be received with courtesy and respect.  
I'm proud to be a Canadian!!

## The Ottawa Jail

“Bring down Rossiter!” The Ottawa Jail guard’s voice echoed off the walls of the small visitor’s room in the Ottawa Jail. A minute later, I heard the clanking of a descending elevator, and Rossiter, my RUSCO salesman, came into view, standing behind jail bars.

I handed a bag sent by his wife, containing socks and underwear, to the jail guard standing beside me, who checked and accepted it. Rossiter was pale, looking ahead but avoiding looking me in the eye. “Your wife and your son’s scoutmaster asked me to bring you some clothes before you are moved to Burrits Rapids to begin your 6 month sentence by the court.” “Thank you” Rossiter whispered, again avoiding my eyes.

I then produced a Rusco sales contract sold by Rossiter and asked, “Mrs. Lawson says she gave you \$500 as deposit on her window order. It is not recorded on the contract. Did you pocket that \$500 deposit?” There was no audible answer but a slight nod of his head indicated that he had stolen \$500 from Rusco. There was nothing left to say, so I walked out of the Jail and rushed to escape the freezing January weather in the comfort of my car.

Driving back to my office, I thought of the circumstances that had brought me to the Jail. Rossiter had applied for a sales position with Rusco. He spoke with confidence about his 10 years of sales to furniture stores throughout Ontario. He now wanted to “get off the road” for the sake of his 15 year old son. “My son needs a father who is present—not absent for long periods.” I hired Rossiter, and for the next three months, he proved to be an effective and efficient salesman.

One Friday, when I was giving him his commission cheque, he asked to speak privately. He said, “I have to appear in court to be sentenced for incidents concerning money when I was on the



road. My son's scoutmaster will speak on my behalf to the Judge. Would you come and testify that I have worked honestly for you these past 3 months?" I agreed, and was at the courthouse to add my voice to the scoutmaster and some letters that supported Rossiter. The Judge said that the light sentence of 6 months was due to the "recommendations of substantial citizens in the community."

Rossiter was led away, and I was thanked by the Scoutmaster for my testimony, and urged by him to visit Rossiter's wife, who could not attend court because of her job with a bank. I visited that evening, when she begged me to deliver some clothes to her husband. The next morning, I received a call from Mrs. Lawson, a customer. She informed me her invoice did not reflect the \$500 deposit she had given to Rossiter. As related, above, I drove to the Jail, and showed the contract to Rossiter. I was puzzled and confused. What would motivate anyone to commit a criminal act and cause pain to one's family and friends? I put these thoughts out of my mind and went back to work.

A few days later, I was visited by the scoutmaster who spoke with feeling about Rossiter's 15 year old son. "He worships his father and is very vulnerable right now. He needs a father who is present in his life. You, as Rossiter's employer, are the only person who can get his sentence reduced and bring him home. This is the phone number of the Canada Parole Board. Please tell them that you can hold Rossiter's job open, if he could be granted an early release."

A week later I was in the office of the Chairman of Canada's Parole Board. In response to my plea, the Chairman said, "Mr. Sternthal, it takes 6 months before a file reaches to my desk." I repeated that I could only hold the job open for a month, then left. Three months later, Rossiter came into my office, to thank me for his early release, and to ask for the opportunity to sell honestly and repay me for my help.

Over the next two months, he was as good as his word. He brought in clean contracts and repaid the debt that he owed to the company. I was not concerned when he did not come into the office, one day, but was concerned when his absence stretched to a week. I asked Ed, a fellow salesman and friend of Rossiter's, if he had been in touch with him. Ed looked uncomfortable, then said in a soft voice, "Max, I'm sorry to tell you: Rossiter is not coming back. He has opened a window store up the street in direct competition with you, and has approached your salesmen to leave you and join him. We all turned our backs on him."

I went into my office, put my chin in my hands, and tried to make sense of this episode. I was operating on the belief that all people are decent and will respond in kind if they are treated fairly and with respect. I could not then, or now, understand what makes a man like Rossiter tick, but I resolved not to let a "bad apple" make me cynical or change my attitude.

I went back to work and my optimism was justified when I kept a staff of 6 commission salesmen on the job for 5 years without a single defection—unprecedented in the direct-selling business, where the usual stay was one season.

## One Drink Is Too Many

I thought I was fortunate, that a man such as Stuart was applying for a sales job with my company. He was well-dressed (a stick pin in his tie, a handkerchief in his breast pocket), well-educated, soft-spoken and presenting an impressive list of previous employments. He soon proved his worth by bringing in sales contracts with deposits, neatly-written and correctly measured.

Two months after his start, he didn't come into the office or phone me.

I was puzzled, until one week later, Ed, one of Stuart's fellow-salesmen told me, "Max, Stuart is an alcoholic. He is drinking now and won't stop until he ends up lying in a gutter somewhere."

This shocked me deeply. I was in the second year of my business, and I had never encountered this situation before.

One month later, Stuart appeared in my office. He was pale, hands trembling, and speaking just above a whisper. He said he was sorry but would I give him another chance to make up for his failure. He needed another week to clean up his act, and then he would resume his sales work and be a reliable salesman. I agreed, and Stuart came back a week later and proved to be as good as his word: contracts were submitted, neat and clean as before.

Two months later, Stuart asked for permission to absent himself for three days next month, to honour a commitment to an elderly aunt to drive her to Toronto to catch her flight to England. I agreed, and yes, you guessed it: Stuart did not return after his "trip to Toronto."

Again, it was Ed who filled me in the picture.

“I went to his home and found him lying on the floor, howling like a dog. His family, in this familiar situation, just walked around him and didn’t even look at him.”

I never saw Stuart again. Fortunately, I had support from Pat O’Brien, an alcoholic who was celebrating 10 years of sobriety, one day at a time. Pat was the RUSCO manufacturing liaison with dealers such as me, and called on my office every two months.

Pat spoke kindly to me, “Max, you mean well in your patience with these men, but you are wasting your time with these people. You cannot help them and you are depriving time from men who could benefit from your help. I speak from personal experience. The only person who can help an alcoholic is an alcoholic himself; one who has hit “bottom” and recognizes that he needs help to stay sober, one-day-at-a-time. The alcoholic will promise you anything, but, in fact, he will ‘sell his mother’ when in the grip of his dependency. After 10 years of sobriety I go daily to AA meetings, because I need their help to stay sober, one-day-at-a-time.”

I never saw Stuart again. Pat’s lessons began to shape my attitudes towards alcoholics, though I admit there were a few more “Stuart” episodes before I decided that I would only employ an alcoholic, if he was attending AA meetings and trying to stay sober one-day-at-a-time.

I spent my time with the other men who were eager for my help. The result: In the next five years, I trained a group of six salesmen, without a single defection.

## **"I'm a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto!!"**

I was stunned as I listened to this incredible statement from the frail elderly woman who approached me after my concert. "I apologize for crying out in the middle of your song of the Jewish Partisans. Every time I hear that song, I go crazy. Then she repeated: "I'm a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto!"

This encounter happened on an ordinary Sunday morning in Florida. I was visiting Jewish retirement homes, and with my guitar entertained the old folks with my songs in Yiddish and English, as well as narrating stories of Shtetl life, the Holocaust and Israel.

From time to time, people quietly introduced themselves as survivors, but only Mrs. Finter cried out in anguish in the middle of my song.

*"Never say that you are going your last way,  
Though lead-filled skies blot out the blue of day,  
The hour for which we long will certainly appear,  
The earth will tremble 'neath our tread,  
We are here!!"*

Her heart-felt cry caused me to pause for a moment, but I continued to the end of the song. I wanted to hear her story, so my wife and I invited her to lunch at a nearby Deli. Over the Bagels and lox, this is the story she related:

“When the Germans conquered Warsaw, they moved a half-million Jews into an area of Warsaw streets designed to hold 50,000 people. They surrounded the area with a wall and gates, and thus created the Jewish Ghetto of Warsaw.

Periodically, thousands of Jewish families received notices to assemble at the train yards for “resettlement.” The trains went

directly to Auschwitz and the crematorium. Some Jews were spared deportations if they were lucky to get a job sewing German army uniforms in a few factories set up for that purpose in the Ghetto.

My father, a man with considerable influence pre-war, used his influence to find me a job as a sewer in one of these factories. I was a terrified 15year-old Jewish girl, when I passed the armed German soldier and entered the sewing factory. I bent my head to the task and sewed German uniforms all day until we were permitted to go back to our overcrowded rooms in the Ghetto.

One day, the young armed German guard came and stood beside me. He caused me to look up by touching my arm with his rifle and indicated by moving his head that he wanted me to accompany him outside the factory. Terrified, I bent towards my sewing machine and continued sewing. After I ignored another two demands to move, the soldier lifted his rifle and smashed my forehead with the butt of his rifle. I fell to the ground and half-blinded by the blood in my eyes, I crawled and then pushed myself up and ran out of the factory.

My father and brother washed my forehead and were appalled at the huge scar that was visible. As you can see, the scar is still visible some 65 years after that German soldier struck me. My father left and didn't return for several hours. He said: "I was able to make contact with a Christian friend who has agreed to help you escape from the Ghetto." He and my brother then kissed me and helped me to lie down in a potato sack on the floor. They sewed the sack tight and then carried the sack on their shoulders through the dark streets until they reached an arranged spot on the Ghetto wall. Whistle signals were exchanged and my father and brother lifted me up and threw the sack over the wall into the waiting hands of my father's Christian friend, who whistled that all was well.

My Christian saviour protected me but I cried two months later, when I looked up and saw that the entire Ghetto was in flames. I knew that I would never see my family again.”

There was silence at our table for a long while, but when I looked at Mrs. Finter, I was puzzled to see her shaking her finger at me in a reproving manner. I asked: “What have I done for you to shake your finger and scold me.”

Mrs. Finter continued shaking her finger at me, then said: “You’re in the wrong place, Mr. Sternthal. We old folks know your songs and stories, we lived them. I am concerned about the young people today, who know little of these events and in future years will know even less. Here is where you must put your time and efforts—with the young people of today and tomorrow!”

At that moment I felt that the direction of my life for my remaining years had changed forever. Deeply moved, I reached across the table and took her tiny hands in my hands and said these words which would guide me for the rest of my life: “Mrs. Finter, I vow to use all my talents and energies to convey the message of our time and people to the young people of today and tomorrow.”

Two years later, when I learned of the passing of Mrs. Finter, I renewed my vow. I visit with groups of young people. I have written a story for young people that explains the Holocaust in a gentle way. I have recorded 3 CDs that convey our heritage from the Shtetl, through the Holocaust and the establishment of a Jewish state after 2000 years. I hope my memoirs will be a useful guide to young people who are searching for a code of life that reconciles our aims of being a “good” Jew, a supporter of Israel, and a protector of the best Canadian values.

I try every day to live up to the vow I made to Mrs. Finter, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto.



## Europe 1976—Family Trip

I was surprised by my children's reaction to my jubilant



announcement, “Children, we are going to Europe this summer for a six-week holiday!”

Sandy: “I’m sixteen. If I can’t go off on my own, it’s a lot of family time together.”

David, “How many restaurants in my Michelin guide book can we visit?”

Karen: “Don’t you think I’m too young for this kind of trip?”

I confess, I was not derailed by their comments. This was a dream come true for me. I arranged to rent a Citroen station wagon in Paris for our six-week trip. I gathered maps and guide books, and planned a trip that would take us through France, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France to London, England. No hotels were booked. We would scout the options when we stopped each late afternoon. It will be a grand adventure, and the children will love it!

It was taken for granted that Phyllis would be the driver of the station wagon, both for reasons of her skill and patience for long-distance driving. I was amazed when Phyllis, after listening to the few instructions in French indicating the features of the wagon, took the wheel and flowed into the fierce traffic through Paris.

I quote from Phyllis's diary on that day (June 26, 1967) "within 10 minutes I lost the brake and we almost wiped out—but, white and shaking, we ground to a stop... the drive to Versailles was



fine...we were impressed with the beauty of the palace and the grounds... went into town, found a charcuterie, bought French bread, cheese and mustard, fruit, drink and yoghurt, and ate picnic style near the Petit Trianon."

France was experiencing an unprecedented heat wave with temperatures hovering around 100F. The Paris hotels were not air-conditioned so the only relief (on the first night) was to sleep in the nude without concern about guests walking by our open bedroom window!

The excitement of visiting historic sites, the language challenge, negotiating which foods to order for individual taste or to share with others in exchange for their tastes, soon created a team spirit in our family.

I was the master-planner (toting a loose-leaf book with guide tips for each country travelled) and Phyllis, the excellent driver (the

designation “leadfoot,” only applied to her senior years later). Karen, David and Sandy were great campers, ready to experience new vistas with good cheer, as they occurred.

Phyllis wrote a diary at the end of each day. (I have all the diaries). I was the photographer. Ten years ago I had 500 photos scanned and placed on a DVD called “Sterntal Family Album.” I sent a copy to each of our children.

I will not repeat what is on the DVD, but recall some of those delicious moments, part of our memories, that are not on paper or DVD.

One incident, told to my embarrassment, causes everyone to say in unison, “some idiot ran over your suitcase. Yes, the idiot was me!”

The circumstances: we arrived at the first air-conditioned motel in Tours, France. I volunteered to park the car, put it in reverse and immediately felt that I had run over something. The ‘something’ was Karen’s suitcase, wedged under the Citroen. Not a problem: I recalled instructions: press a button and the entire chassis lifts up! I pressed the button. “OOPPS”— wrong button! The entire chassis descended like a guillotine, and mashed the suitcase into the ground.

The young French lad who was moving the suitcases did not witness my error but brought it into the motel and announced to all, “Some idiot crushed the suitcase!”

I think I exhibit grace and good humour when the family relates that incident amid laughter and finger-pointing.

The guidebooks all warned of the dangers of a visit to Naples— pot holes and theft from parked cars. I left Naples out of our

itinerary, but anticipated our visit to Pompeii, to view life as it was lived 2000 years ago.

We missed the entrance for 'Parking' for Pompeii, so decided to park on a busy business street close to Pompeii. We locked the car in front of a store and visited the incredible streets and houses of Pompeii. Interesting note: all streets were straight, except the street of the brothels—it curved and curved, it was impossible to see who was patronizing the brothels! The private villas with statues featuring large penises caused a good deal of discussion.

When we returned to our car and were seated, ready to leave Pompeii, a gentleman knocked on the driver's window. Phyllis nervously lowered the window and braced herself for an argument about our 'illegal' parking.

The gentleman said: "You parked your wagon in front of my store, with all your suitcases visible to passers-by. I have been watching your car for the past two hours to make sure you were not robbed. Do not leave your car unattended in the future. Have a happy holiday in Italy."

With red faces we thanked the gentleman for his kindness and concern.

To this day, one of us will relate the amazement and horror of viewing an elderly lady in Siena, catch one of the many pigeons on the street, break its neck and toss it into her bag! Dinner that night?

I announced each day how much money would be given to each person to pay for their dinner in the evening. (Breakfast was included with the sleepover, and lunch, usually a picnic with deli and drinks bought at a charcuterie and eaten picnic style in a public park). K.D.S. were told that they could spend the dinner

money as they saw fit e.g. forego main course and spend it all on dessert, or forego dessert and spend it on a special main course. They could also negotiate with each other and share their meals, and thus taste a wider variety of dishes. David, and his copy of the Michelin guide book, was often the centre of these discussions.

As Phyllis cruised the highways of Europe, the discussions on the back seat took on the air of an economic conference of gourmet-lovers.

Travelling as a family unit definitely has its merits. Everyone, especially Italians, love families and many courtesies were extended to us by young and old. A grandfatherly waiter in Santa Margherita is still remembered by David. He noticed that David did not touch his salad course. He fixed David with a stern look, shook his finger, and said, “No Salada—no Desserta!!” This refrain has been repeated by our family many times over the years... and, by the way, David loves salads now!!

## David Lewis

David Lewis was my hero! I was 17 when I fell under the spell of his Welsh-accented oratory. He was running for election to Parliament as MP for Cartier district (home of the Jewish 'Ghetto' in Montreal). I was amazed to hear him address the audience in pure French, English and Yiddish, considering the fact that he came to Canada at age 12,



speaking only Yiddish and Polish. Now at age 34 and 22 years after arriving in Canada, he was a lawyer, Rhodes scholar, Secretary of the fledgling CCF (socialist) party, and regarded as a leader of the socialist world on both sides of the Atlantic. I considered it a privilege to climb telephone poles to display his posters and to distribute his pamphlets door-to-door.

In the spring of 1982, I sang a song in tribute to David Lewis at his graveside, surrounded by members of his family and an array of prominent socialists and members of Parliament, gathered for the unveiling of a permanent monument to David. I was the Cantor and cemetery chairman of Temple Israel and had arranged the sale of a cemetery plot for David Lewis, with his son, Stephen.

Sophie, David's wife, called me within the following year and asked if I would agree to attend the unveiling and sing a song that was precious to David. When I agreed, Sophie invited me to her home and gave me a CD with the song called "DU" (YOU) on it. When I said I was familiar with this Yiddish song, Sophie asked me to sing it for her. I did and successfully passed my

audition. I then questioned whether Sophie's choice of a song about GOD was appropriate for David Lewis, known to be an atheist all his life. (E.g., the "Englanders" say: their King is the greatest, the "Italyainors" say: their King is the greatest, but I say: Du (You) God are the greatest, etc.)

Sophie replied: "It was David's favourite song. Whenever there was a gathering of David's labour and socialist friends in our home, they always begged David to sing this song."

On a bright day in May, David's daughter spoke of her father, David, the family man. On a nod from Sophie, I sang this "god-intoxicated" song in memory of a great man who gave up great comfort and wealth to travel the highways and byways of Canada, preaching the merits of a moderate and compassionate form of social democracy. In my second song, I amended the words of the Partisan song (in English) with these words, "The hour for which we yearn will certainly appear, the world will hear our tread as we declare: WE ARE HERE!!"

I never met David Lewis, but he set an example and standard of behaviour that I hoped to follow all my life. For example: he was a great student; he taught himself English by buying a copy of Dickens *The Old Curiosity Shop* and an English-Yiddish dictionary. He sailed through Baron Byng High School, McGill University, studied law at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, was a fierce debater, passed up an invitation to become a leader of the British labour party and returned to Canada to be the first Secretary of the fledgling CCF Party (later the NDP) at a minimal salary of \$1,200 per annum!!

His philosophy (learned from his Bund/Socialist father): "It is better to go along with the masses in a not totally straight direction than to separate ourselves and remain a purist."

Later in his career, he was a member of Parliament and then

leader of the NDP in parliament. For two years, he was the most powerful man in Canada, because the NDP held the balance of power that kept the Trudeau government in power. Several pieces of progressive legislation were the price Trudeau paid for this support.

David Lewis was my idol of what a “good” Jew and a “good” Canadian should be. He gave up wealth and status to support a progressive view of life. He was not religious, but was proud to be a Jew. He was a shining example to me of strength of character, persistence when all around are failing. He was a good and cheerful father and husband.

Phyllis, my wife, is buried in the plot next to David Lewis, as I will be when my time comes.



## **“Capitalist - But Thinks Like A Socialist”**

“I don’t understand Mr. Sternthal. He is a capitalist but thinks and acts like a socialist!”

This comment was made by the husband of Claire, my bookkeeper for 18 years. When she repeated his comment to me, I began to think of my company, RUSCO Ottawa, and whether there was any merit to his comment.

I had to admit that my background from my youth to the 1930s was dominated by pro-union feelings and left-wing agendas. I recalled stories from my older brother, Julius, a dress cutter, regarding the fierce struggles to establish a union of the dress-cutters in Montreal. The bosses, often relatives of the dress cutters, brought in goons to attack and intimidate the workers. Severe beatings of union organizers were an everyday occurrence.

I recall that Uncle Ben, my brother’s boss, tried to escape the attention of the unions by opening a factory cutting room in Trois Rivieres, some 60 miles from Montreal. My brother, Julius, left Montreal in the early morning on Mondays and did not return until late Friday night. This went on for two years, until Uncle Ben closed the factory and returned the production of dresses to his now union-controlled Montreal factory. I worked as a shipper in Uncle Ben’s business for a year, between my high school graduation and the beginning of College. I witnessed the distress of skilled sewers in the factory who quit rather than become automatons, sewing the same sleeve all day long, instead of sewing a complete garment as skilled sewers had done before the introduction of piece-work production.

I’m certain that I subconsciously applied lessons I learned in my youth in my new role as “capitalist-owner” and in relations with my workers. For example, my salesmen were paid 15%

commission on their sales. Some salesmen could earn up to \$1,500 a month—a princely amount in the 1960's and 1970's. I considered this a modest form of profit-sharing.

I was the only company in the window business that paid its installers by the hour rather than on “piece-work.” I trusted my installers to give me a full day's work while providing my customers with quality work.

My instructions were clear, “Take as much time as you need to do a quality job.”

This attitude created a feeling of pride in my workers, and I believe I was served honestly by most men. RUSCO enjoyed a growing reputation for quality product and installation.

I wanted my staff to feel that they shared in the profits of my business. I set target goals for sales and when these goals were met, I treated my sales staff to a grand lunch. When the office and installation staff complained that they too deserved this recognition, I included the entire staff in our special lunches. It was heartening to see the feelings of pride in our company, and the mutual respect between all branches of our enterprise.

I never felt that I was exploiting my staff. I tried to create conditions that gave my staff pride in their work, pride in their company, respect for each other and their “boss”—me.

# 1980 to 2016

## Thoughts at 74 for My Grandchildren

Well, Michael and Adam: I have come to the present point in my story about “My Journey” through life. I hope that God will grant me many more years so that I can see you grow up to be young men who will be a credit to yourselves for your devotion to honesty, dedication, and compassion to others.

What started out to be a short note with some of my thoughts and hopes for your future, has turned into a very long letter. I would like to conclude with some random stories and sayings that have had a profound effect on me, as I journeyed through life.

When I was attending Night College, I recall a lady asking our professor on the last day of lectures if he could summarize the entire course on Child Psychology in a few simple sentences. I thought her question was foolish, because we had attended lectures for nine months and read about 20 heavy text-books. However, the Professor thought for a moment, and then offered these sentences: First, love your children. Second, set them a good example, and third, leave them alone.

I often thought of these simple thoughts when you’re Grandma and I raised your mom and your aunt and uncle. Relating them to you, I am sure you know and feel that you have the unqualified love of parents and grandparents. I know we try to set a good example. This long letter is my personal effort to describe my life, with its failures as well as successes, so that you can have a written guide to help you now and in the future, as you make your own way. Lastly, the words “Leave them alone” I interpret as follows: Trust your children to do the right thing, if you have done the right thing in their upbringing.

When I was very young, I learned a simple Hebrew song that I liked to sing solo or as a round song with others. This is the song:

**Im ain anili - mili?**

**U-she-ani lo-atzma - mo-ani?**

**Veem lo achshav - eymotai - eymotai?**

I soon learned the translation of the song, as follows:

**If I am not for myself - who will be for me?**

**And if I am for myself only -what am I?**

**And if not now - when?**

Over the years I pondered the meaning of the song. In time, it became the most important guide in giving direction to my life. I share with you the meaning I have dug out of these simple questions after countless visits and revisits. **Im ain anili - mili? - If I am not for myself - who will be for me?**

It says to me, that I am responsible for my actions. At every stage of my life, there are areas of responsibility that grow as I grow in maturity. It can start with good habits like brushing my teeth; continue with looking after my toys and respecting the property and space of others. Growing older, it means accepting the consequences of my actions, even if they are unpleasant. It means not to lie to avoid consequences but to tell the truth. It means to stand tall and not blame others for what we have done. It means that we never fall into the pit of ‘victimization’—claiming that we should not pay the penalty because parents, friends, society did not do the right thing for us. It means that we try at all times to do the right (honest, fair, compassionate) thing and that we never fear making mistakes. Learning from our mistakes empowers us to grow into courageous people who can help ourselves and ultimately help others by our example.

**U-she-ani lo-atzma - mo-ani? And if I am for myself only - what am I?** When we are infants, we are totally dependent on our mothers for survival. It is their unqualified love which enables them to make any self-sacrifice necessary to prepare our entrance into the world of eventual self-reliance and fulfillment as human beings. Just as we were nurtured, I believe that we can only grow into true manhood when we share this love and caring with others around us. Yes, we must be responsible for ourselves, but we need to reach out to others with love. By reaching out, we melt the barriers that exclusive self-love erects to isolate us from our humanity. Thus, we can reach our human potential. Boys, let me try to simplify these thoughts.

I read in a newspaper column a simple suggestion that went like this: “Each day, make at least one person happy that they met you”. I put that piece of paper in my wallet and decided to try to do it. It was amazing to see the pleasure on the faces of family, friends and strangers who reacted to a simple friendly comment or even a smile. It was amazing to see how that simple act lifted me out of total self-absorption and made me aware of the needs of others. Can you do this in your daily life? Of course you can. Consider: You share a game or treat with your brother. You help a friend to master a school problem that is confusing, you compliment your mother or dad for a delicious meal, you help an older person carry or lift something heavy or help a handicapped person in any way that you can. Be aware of the world around you. The good feeling you have will be sufficient reward.

**Veem lo achshav - eymotai - eymotai? – And if not now - when?**

It took a long time for me to realize that the last sentence of the song was the most difficult part to do in real life. Even though I understood and accepted the ideas of the first two lines, it still remained my responsibility to put them into practice---but when? It's amazing how many excuses we can invent to postpone doing

something. Here are a few of my most common excuses: “I’ll do it tomorrow... after I watch this terrific video; I really will get around to phoning and enquiring about my sick friend, but it makes me feel sad to go to a house of mourning, so I’ll not go” etc. I’m sure, if you think about it, that you can come up with your own list of favorite excuses regarding homework, cleaning up your room, calling a friend. The last line of the song (I believe it was written by the famous Rabbi Hillel (75 BCE), reminds us that the time to start is NOW! Another Rabbi said: “The day is short. The task is long. We are not obliged to finish it, but we are obliged to start”.

I want to conclude with a lovely story I read during our High Holiday Services.

“Two young boys were lost in the forest. Together they looked for the path that would lead them out of the forest. They tried many paths, but they led nowhere. Suddenly, they came upon an old man. They asked him if he could show them the true path out of the forest. The old man said: ‘I too am lost. I have tried many paths that led nowhere. Let us join hands. I will point out the paths I took that led nowhere and you will do the same. Then together we will try the remaining paths and we will find the true path out of the forest soon enough.’ The two boys and the old man joined hands, and soon found their way out of the forest.”

Michael, Adam... through this letter, let us join hands and find the “true” path of life that leads to the light, the light of Peace and Contentment.

## **Cantor Max**

My love for Judaism was expressed through music and song for most of my life.

At 10, I was a member of the YMHA Children's Choir, and a 12, I was invited to be the Cantor of the YMHA Jr. Congregation. Two years later, when our student Rabbi, Willie Schushat, graduated from McGill University, I was asked to assume his rabbinic role as well as Cantor. I was paid an honorarium for this dual role which I performed for the next 3 years.

When I was 18, I taught myself to strum the guitar and developed a program of folk songs, many of which were Yiddish, Hebrew and English songs with a Jewish content. I loved singing and leading sing songs. At the same time, I observed the high holidays by singing in various orthodox synagogue choirs.

At 28, I left Montreal to set up a business in Ottawa, ON. I carried a letter from Lavy Becker, Executive Director of the YMHA to Abe Lieff, a lawyer and prominent leader of the Ottawa Jewish community. The letter introduced me to the Ottawa Jewish community

I called on Mr. Lieff and asked him to arrange a business license for my new business. When we chatted, I mentioned my experience with synagogue choirs, Mr. Lieff enthusiastically invited me to join his synagogue choir. (He was the President of Agudath Israel Congregation).

“Present yourself to Cantor David Aptowitzer, the choir leader. Stand beside my brother Joe Lieff, who will teach you the baritone part of the High Holiday service.”

I did and was welcomed by the choir that Yom Tov and for the

next ten years.

In 1966, when our daughter, Sandy, was seven, I decided to formally become a member of Agudath Israel Congregation, so that Sandy could attend their religious school and learn about her Jewish heritage.

At the same time, I was approached by Irving Singer to join 17 couples who were interested to form the first reform congregation in Ottawa. The prospect of starting afresh appealed to me. Agudath Israel was then in the throes of settling a dispute between two contending sides: one determined to remain a conservative/orthodox congregation, and the other advancing more relaxed and liberal priorities. I decided to go with the fledgling Reform congregation that appeared open to all points of view.



## Cantor Max at Temple Israel

Soon after joining, I was asked to be the “volunteer” cantor, based on my past experiences. I agreed and embarked on an adventure that challenged and pleased me for the next 20 years. Here are some of the challenges that confronted me (a cantor without any formal training and



one who could not read music). At that time, the Reform movement did not have any permanent staff to visit Ottawa. I recall two visits to conduct services: one by a lay person and the other by a Rabbi from Toronto. The service was largely conducted in English with readings and song. I was not pleased. I reached into my background and introduced melodies of the orthodox, conservative, and YMHA choirs that I had sung in. I began the pattern of reading in English and singing in Hebrew that dominated our services for many years.

In the early years I spent the summers rehearsing with Bertha Gurofsky, our pianist. Our High Holiday services grew in size and beauty when I sang with our choir under the excellent direction of Ellen Asherman. After we moved into our own building, we grew to the point where we rented the adjoining building to accommodate the close to 1000 members at the High Holidays.

In the early years, there were several “firsts” that challenged me.

The “first marriage”, sent me back to lean on David Aptowitzer, choir director of Agudath Israel. He sang the “Sheva Brochos” (7 Blessings) on a tape which I practiced and delivered on the wedding day.

The tragic deaths of Lindy Silverman and Maddie Alexander, brought our small congregation together to grieve as a family. I turned to Cantor David to learn the El Moley Rachamim prayer and the Shiva services.

In addition to my services as Cantor, I served a one-year term as the third President. I also served as chairman of the Temple Israel Cemetery committee for 13 years on the combined search committee that finally chose Herbert Corners to be developed as a cemetery for future generations of Jews from all synagogues in Ottawa.

After Rabbi David Powell and Arthur Benjamin established our religious school, I was very happy to visit the classes to teach the children basic melodies of the service so that they would feel comfortable when they attended services.

## Kol Nidre

I had the honour to chant the Kol Nidre prayer for 30 years. I regarded this honour solemnly as a responsibility to prepare the congregation to pray for forgiveness on Yom Kippur day—the day of Repentance. I created a tradition by chanting the prayer without piano or choir accompaniment. I only realized in the past few years the impact my rendition of the Kol Nidre petition had on many fellow congregants. On several occasions recently I was approached by congregants I did not recognize and listened as they spoke of the feelings of awe they experienced while listening to my Kol Nidre prayer. I recall that I spent time in researching the message in the chant and I was grateful that I was able to convey that heart-felt feeling through my voice in that stirring melody.

In 2001, after recuperating from heart-surgery, I picked up my guitar after an absence of 30 years. I created 7 programs of verse and song about “Shtetl life, the Holocaust, Children of the Holocaust, Resistance to Hitlerism, The near destruction of European Jewry and the rebirth of the nation in Israel.”

Over the past 15 years, I have presented these programs to schools, synagogues and retirement homes, in Florida and Ottawa. I also recorded 4 of these programs on CDs (SONGS AND STORIES OF OUR PEOPLE).

In the past year (my 90<sup>th</sup>) I have created a book I call: A HOLOCAUST READER by assembling the scripts of these programs. The foreword reads, “A useful aid to Jewish educators and program planners for observance of Yom Hashoah and Yom Hatzmaot.”

I hope to place copies of my book in the libraries of Religious schools, Hillel Houses and JCCs.

## **Yitzchok – My “Russian” Friend**

When I entered Yitzchok Nyvelt's room in the Hillel Lodge Jewish Retirement Home on his invitation, my eyes were drawn immediately to a huge accordion, lying on his bed. When I asked him, in Yiddish, (the only language we had in common) to play something, he strapped on the accordion, and played a Yiddish song. I was familiar with that song, and began to sing it while a delighted Yitzchok played. He quickly followed with other Jewish songs, and I sang along with those that I recognized.

By the end of the afternoon, we became a team. Yitzchok would play professionally any piece of sheet music placed in front of him, and I would sing the songs. We agreed that our collaboration would result in concerts we would stage at the Lodge for the entertainment of his fellow residents. The result of this spontaneous meeting led to five years of programs, in Yiddish and English, and the opportunity to learn more about this extraordinary Jewish musician, decorated hero of the World War in Russia, and the twenty-five years he served as a musician in a Russian military band.

Yitzchok's story gradually emerged, as we rehearsed our programs. I learned of the awful losses Yitzchok had suffered in the terrible war. His parents and two brothers fell in battle. One day, I saw their photos, Russian documents and medals, detailing their sacrifice to their country. Yitzchok, wiped a tear from his eye, but declined to talk of his own medals and citations.

Our concerts were a hit with the residents, who inquired when we would present the next concert. In the third year, I announced that a small group of singers I had recruited, would present a performance of "Fiddler on the Roof." I obtained a script of the Broadway performance and a copy of the original story by the author Sholem Aleichem, and with some careful editing and

patching, I came up with a script that required four singers and three musicians, including Yitzchok. It was a very ambitious undertaking and we rehearsed feverishly.

As the day approached, I suggested to the Hillel Director, that we invite a group of children from the “Tamir” organization to attend the performance. “Tamir” was a wonderful organization that looked after severely-handicapped children. They responded positively, and chose 15 of their charges that would appreciate a musical show. On the day, they came into the hall and took their places on the floor, in front of the residents.

"Fiddler" played the opening notes on his violin, and the show proceeded. The audience was enthralled. Some of the children stood up and danced or shouted encouragement. The actors and I were swept up in the emotions of the play. When we sang the last song of the play, the entire audience rose and applauded. We embraced each other. This was a moment to remember for the rest of our lives!

In subsequent years, I had my own health problems and the passing of my wife to handle, and I lost touch with Yitzchok Nyvelt. When I sat down to write these pleasant reminiscences, I phoned to reconnect with Yitzchok. I was sad to learn that soon after our successful play, Yitzchok had passed away. I am left with memories and gratitude for the rare privilege I had, to work and sing with a consummate musician. Rest well, dear friend!

## Concluding Remarks

In the past year (my 90<sup>th</sup>) I have written a children's story about my imaginary 12-year old cousin, Danny that explains the Holocaust and Kristallnacht as seen through the eyes of a 12 year old.

Two years ago, after the passing of Phyllis (my wife), I was approached by Adrienne Paknadel-Powell (widow of Temple's first Rabbi, David Powell) to join a choir of 12 seniors. We call ourselves the "Sunset Singers." We visit senior retirement homes, Alzheimer day-care centres, to bring good cheer through joyous songs of hope.

I am grateful that I have the energy to sing with the group as we visit the different venues. I am particularly moved when, at the end of each concert we leave the stage and walk up to our audience singing "This Little Light of Mine", shaking hands or touching each person in the audience. I am overwhelmed by the opportunity to engage personally with these lovely people. They often thank me, but I feel that I should thank them for the opportunity to serve.

I write this in my 90<sup>th</sup> year to indicate that life is not an "either-or" situation, that I was able to combine a life of private business pursuit with service to my peers through verse and song.

I hope to continue until my last breath.