

A Child's View of the World in the '30s

Perhaps I am being too hard on myself, but in retrospect, I find it hard to believe that my life through the late 30s seemed largely unaffected (and unaware) by what was going on in the world.

Trying to focus on what I knew at the time about the world, not what I subsequently learned: I knew there was a Spanish Civil War and we collected silver paper, peeling it off from discarded cigarette packages, for the Loyalists. We knew that Hitler and Mussolini supported Franco, and there was an Abraham Lincoln brigade made up of Americans who tried to help the Loyalists. At the time, I don't think I knew about Communists and Socialists, about the Soviet Union helping the Loyalists, about Ernest Hemingway, and why the US didn't help the good guys. This was 1936-7, and I was less than 10 years old. I knew that Mussolini attacked Ethiopia, and bombed them, and nobody helped Hailie Selassie, who was the leader of the Ethiopians

I knew that the Japanese were doing terrible things to China and that they captured Manchuria which was part of China and changed its name to Manchukuo. I knew that the leaders of China were a husband and wife named Mr. and Mrs. (or Madam) Chiang Kai Shek. I knew that there were a lot of people in China, and that they had invented lots of things a long time ago: paper and spaghetti and gunpowder. I knew that Japan was able to make a lot of stuff and sell it very cheaply. It seemed that almost all the toys kids played with were Made in Japan, but when people wanted to boycott them, the Japanese put Made in USA on their toys, to confuse Americans because there was a city in Japan called Usa, and if we didn't look carefully, we thought it said Made in USA.

And most important, I knew that Hitler and the Nazis had taken power in Germany. I knew that Hitler hated the Jews, though I didn't know why. Somewhere I learned that he had written a book and said that the Jews were to blame for all of Germany's troubles. I remember a few occasions when my mother and I were listening to the radio in the morning, and the program was interrupted by a speech being given by Hitler. I couldn't understand why the station would broadcast it in a language we didn't understand. It sounded like some mad man screaming.

I grew up having learned a lot of Bible stories in Hebrew school, especially those about the enemies of the Jews: about Haman at Purim, and Pharaoh at Pesach, and Antiochus at Chanukah. Always, some tyrant wanted to kill us, and I couldn't understand why. My mother told me about how badly the Jews were treated in Europe, about pogroms and anti-Semitism, but that was because the Christians said that the Jews killed Christ.

I knew I had relatives in Europe: my mother's sister and her family in France, and my mother's brother and his family in Romania. I knew France was a very sophisticated country that had a lot of artists, and the Eiffel Tower. And I knew that Romania was where my mother was born, that they didn't like Jews, had lots of Gypsies, and had a king named Carol, who had a girlfriend who was Jewish named Magda Lupescu.

What else did I know about the rest of the world as a 10 year old? I knew that there were Jews who wanted to go to Palestine and make a Jewish State. They were called Zionists and they raised money to buy land by asking people to contribute to the Jewish National Fund. I knew about Canada, because that was where my mother landed after she left Romania. And we had relatives in Toronto. And like any informed 10 year old, I knew about the rest of the Western Hemisphere—Mexico and South America, and especially Puerto Rico, because we had Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood. I had a pretty good idea about Europe, especially England. I couldn't understand why they still had a king, but there were a few other countries with kings and queens, but they were just for show. I knew the names of most of the countries of the world from collecting stamps and looking through the world almanac. And I wondered why the countries of Africa were controlled by a bunch of European countries.