

## # 39 POETRY

This may be a bit premature, but I am writing this as the introduction to the section of my memoirs containing the scores of poems I have written over the years. I am sure my many readers would like to know the origin of my interest in poetry. It started when I was two years old and my mother made me recite the following couplet for company: "I AM AN AMERICAN JEW AND I AM PROUD OF IT TOO."

I suspect I performed this up to the time I entered school. At some point I must have begun to feel silly, and besides, all my mother's relatives and friends had heard it already. But it was imbedded in my memory, and as an adult I thought about its meaning within the broader context of the Jew in America.

All children are exposed to nursery rhymes, and growing up in New York, we learned some great jump-rope rhymes as well. However, not every young person gets hooked on rhymes. You need a little help, mostly from your teachers. And we had some wonderful English teachers in junior high school and high school, and they introduced us to (and made us memorize) lots of poems. A very special high school English teacher was Bernard Frechtman who was very big on Emily Dickinson.

Perhaps the most important factor in my early interest in poetry was the very precious leather-bound volume called "The Golden Treasury" which had been given to my mother. On the fly-leaf of the book is inscribed "To Mrs. Celia Schlitt From the friends of the Westchester Mothers Club. May 1926." I have always been puzzled by this inscription. Unfortunately, I never asked my mother about it. What was the Westchester Mothers Club? Was she a member, even though she was not a mother? Why did they give her the book? I may have been 10 or 11 when she first shared this book with me. I still have it, and treasure it. It was published in 1924 by Thomas Y. Crowell and the full title is "The Golden Treasury of Songs and Poems Selected by Francis T. Palgrave" It was originally compiled in 1861, and was dedicated to Alfred Tennyson. I was moved, when, reading the Preface, to see underlinings by my mother.

The big surprise for me was in the Introduction by J. Walter McSpadden, quoting Henry Adams about Francis Turner Palgrave: "Few Americans will ever ask whether anyone has described the Palgraves, but the family was one of the most describable in all England at that day. Old Sir Francis, the father, had been much the greatest of all the historians of early England, the only one who was un-English; and the reason of his superiority lay in his name, which was Cohen, and his mind, which was Cohen also, or at least not English. He changed his name to Palgrave in order to please his wife." I had never read the Introduction before. Now I can add Palgrave to my growing list of prominent people who, unbeknownst to me, were Jewish.

My mother, usually on a weekend morning, would ask me to read some of the poems from The Golden Treasury. We did this on and off, until I was a teenager. I worked my way through the different sections: Shakespeare sonnets, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Scott, Burns, Wordsworth, Tennyson. Our favorites were "Rubaiyat" by Fitzgerald and Kubla

Khan by Coleridge, and the Americans, especially Edgar Allan Poe. I couldn't get enough of "The Raven" (which I tried to memorize) and "The Bells" and "Annabel Lee." The book is falling apart, and the leather binding is flaking, but it is still my favorite collection and I pick it up from time to time.

Another influence, also sparked by my mother, was the finale of the "Forward Hour," the Yiddish radio program Sunday mornings from 11 am to 12 noon on WEVD, "1330 on your radio dial." My mother listened to this program religiously and wanted me to listen as well, but I had no interest in the "schmaltzy" melodramas and music. But when Zvee Scooler came on, my attendance was a must. No excuses. Sit down and hear the Master of Rhyme who interpreted the events of the day in poetry, long before Calvin Trillin. He called himself "The Gram-meister" and he was brilliant. And I listened and was taken with his ability to summarize the news in rhyme week after week. His sign-off has stayed with me all these years: "Ich bin Zvee, Hersh Yoseph ben Reb Yankif Mendl haLevy Scooler, der Forvitchn Gram-meister."

When we were in junior high school, a few of us wrote poems and stories for our literary magazine, "The Knowlton Herald." I suspect the primary motivation was to see our name in print. Even at the time, we knew they weren't much. But there was someone named Phil Alexander, a year behind us, who wrote epic poems in free verse which blew us away. Sixty-five years later, I still avoid free verse. I need the support of a rhyme.

I was enchanted by the rhymes of W. S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan, and tried to memorize many of the "recitatives." You didn't have to sing to do the patter songs. Soon after I discovered G and S, along came Danny Kaye and he was doing the same thing with words and music provided by his wife. And then I got hooked on Ogden Nash, and a lesser known but equally clever rhymster, Samuel Hoffenstein.

Someone said that water seeks its own level. If that means that as I poet I would rather be like W.S. Gilbert and Ogden Nash than T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, he is right.

Over the years, I continued to read poetry, and collected anthologies (usually second hand). And when I undertook to write a poem, I tended to borrow the meter from a better known work. My earliest works are lost: My poems for mother's day or for a girl friend's birthday. Most of them began with some variation of Roses are red etc.

A friend observed that, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, I was an occasional poet, writing for special occasions. What follows are my efforts for my family, friends and workplace colleagues. I suspect it would be no great tragedy if they were lost as well. But here they are.

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