

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I am 77 years old. I am retired. I have a great deal less energy than I used to have. My memory is not what it once was, nor is my hearing, sight, or muscle tone.

Perhaps even my sense of smell, taste, and touch have diminished. The future is becoming more uncertain although I will still buy green bananas.) Under these circumstances, I have decided to take the bits and pieces of my life that I have written over the years and am continuing to write, and put them together into a cohesive whole.

This will be the first draft of that attempt. I have, scattered among my papers, note books and steno pads containing my jottings, going back to high school and before. They should serve as a useful reference if I can locate them. In addition, my papers from my various jobs should help me remember work-related events, which are getting dimmer and dimmer. I am not sure how honest I will be about very personal matters. And who really needs to know about them. Is it really necessary to write everything?

Reading Philip Roth, my current favorite author, I get the impression that he did a lot of research in preparation for his novels. My first thought was that, in order to tell my story, it all should be in my head. At least this first draft. Although I have a fairly good memory for dates—when major events in my life, and in the world, took place, it is eroding. (I am having trouble remembering when I retired: I believe it was 1997.) I mention this because I wanted to pinpoint when I joined the Brookline Adult Education class on Autobiographical Writing. It was January 1998. I stayed with it for a couple of semesters, wrote a half dozen pieces, and left. Now, in September 2004, (and rereading and editing in March 2005) I am back again.

In my folder for the writing class, in addition to my earlier pieces written for the class, I have a handwritten series of letters to my kids which I did in 1983. I will type it now, and I am sure it will contain the same urge to tell my children about my life:

April 14, 1983

Dear Kids,

I suspect the same state of mind that impelled my mother to acquire a recording machine in 1949, is pushing me to put these words on paper to you now. There are obvious differences. My mother couldn't write, and was frustrated in her desire to communicate. I can write (though my handwriting is just barely legible) and I spend most of my time "communicating" if you call writing memos, phoning, and attending meetings, communicating.

I am addressing these words to you. My mother used the device of speaking to her mother. I am not sure what she thought would happen with those recordings; if anyone would hear them other than herself. I feel confident that you will read this, and in so doing, will have a better idea of my world, my childhood and my thoughts. We shared some of them, but there is seldom enough time.

I plan to spend about a half hour each day writing something to you. When enough pages are written, I will Xerox them and send them to you. They won't be edited. (My mother

told me that Bernard Shaw once wrote a letter beginning “Please forgive me for writing such a long letter. I don’t have time to write a short one.”)

Perhaps I should have an outline or a plan. Begin with my earliest memories, or establish an approach by subject: home, school, friends, politics. I’m afraid I’m not built that way. Our conversations should make that clear.

I am troubled by a number of thoughts: Will this turn out to be boring? Suppose I have very little to say. (This was the most disturbing feeling I had about my mother’s recordings.) I wouldn’t want this to degenerate into a lot of trivia. I hope that, if this is the case, I will be able to detect it and stop. But I do want to write you and hear from you. And this is the beginning. Until tomorrow. Dad

April 18,
Dear Kids,

Of course, it isn’t “tomorrow”. As I believe I said, (no, I didn’t) I am writing this in the office, and Friday, April 15, turned out to be more hectic than I thought. As always, I am trying to finish a report which is overdue, and there was a memorial service at the State House that I attended, And in the afternoon we had a little party for Pete and Mary Lee who are each taking Spring vacations. So, no time for this.

The memorial service that I mentioned was sponsored by the State Legislature, and memorialized the Holocaust and the Armenian and Cambodian Genocides. My first reaction was one of resentment: what kind of political game is being played by linking the three? Mass. has a large Armenian population, and a growing Cambodian-Southeast Asian population. Are they piggy-backing them on the tragedy of European Jewry? I am sure those tragedies are valid. In that case, have individual memorials for them. At the end, I had modified my feelings, and learned a little.

In April 1915, the Turks began the slaughter of Armenians which resulted in one and a half million deaths. This act, in fact, was a model for Hitler, including the fact that 25 years later, it was almost forgotten. These facts I didn’t know. And the killing of Cambodians are continuing today. I don’t know why either, but I do intend to find out.

Tomorrow is the 40th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and last week’s gathering of the American Holocaust survivors makes me think about my own unawareness of the enormity of the crimes that were taking place. Are 13-14 year old “children” oblivious if it is not happening to them? At what age do you become concerned about injustice? I knew that the events in Europe were important, and that terrible things were happening, and that my mother was very upset, and that people were being killed. But I cannot tell whether I understood how horrible those acts were. I had been aware that wars and killing were taking place almost from the time a child comprehends.

I have memories of the war between Japan and China (which is now almost forgotten); certainly of the Spanish Civil War, and before that of Mussolini's bombing of Ethiopia. I believe these events I remember because of the newsreels in the movies. The contrast of good and evil then was so stark, I couldn't understand how the world permitted these things to happen. Highly industrialized Japan attacked innocent China and Manchuria; the Fascists helped Fascist Franco overthrow democratic, Loyalist Spain, and the only people helping the Loyalists were Russia and the American Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Then, word of Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jews finally gained attention, but few people believed anything like that could happen. I remember I wore a button I got in Hebrew School that said "Boycott Nazi Germany", a campaign that was supposed to get Americans to stop buying German products and thus hurt their economy. My first lesson in international economics.

The terrible things in Spain and Ethiopia and China were bad, but they didn't have a direct impact on me or on my family (which meant my mother's brother and sister in Romania and Paris.) the actions of Hitler did threaten them, and I remember how anxious my mother was. But her concern transcended family. She truly was concerned about all humanity—not just Jews, not just Europe. From my earliest days I remember her talking about peace, about how barbaric war is, why can't people find another solution for differences among nations? This wasn't the most stimulating conversation for a 12 year old, and it was so far away. I suspect I listened, and then tuned her out. And then the horror built and came closer, and the US was in war, but I was in high school and I had my hands full going to Stuyvesant and working in the newspaper division of the NY Public Library, and growing up.

April 19,
Hi—

To continue describing that period of the early 40s may well be the easiest time for me to discuss. Even though it is 40 years ago, the memory of those years are quite vivid. It must be something about adolescence, or emerging from a very narrow environment into a much wider one, combined with extraordinarily dramatic events taking place.

I have been perplexed for some time as to whether there were giants in those days, or whether, as I have grown, the people who are supposed to be big don't appear big to me. The political leaders of that time that moved me were larger than life. Two of them: Pres. Roosevelt and Mayor LaGuardia, I practically worshipped. I saw them as men of compassion, wisdom and concern. They wanted to help the poor and the unemployed. LaGuardia saved NY (from what, I really don't know), and FDR saved America—from a depression that could have gotten worse.

The link between the people and these two leaders was the radio. My mother bought our first radio in 1936 in order to listen to FDR's campaign speeches, and I suspect she tried to get me to listen as well. I must have gotten caught up in the frenzy of the 1936 campaign because I vaguely remember taking chalk from school and writing VOTE FOR FDR all over the neighborhood. I also attribute my collecting buttons to that campaign.

FDR was a spellbinder on the radio. In the years that followed, we listened to his fireside chats on the radio in the kitchen of our two-room apartment on Fox Street. I believe the radio was on top of the refrigerator. The radio memories range from my mother's constant objections to my "doing my homework with the radio on," a complaint through elementary, junior high and high school, to not being able to hear various adventure stories that came on at 9 pm on CBS, WABC in New York (later WCBS), or WJZ (later WABC), or WEAJ (later WNBC); because my mother wanted to hear the news on WOR (Mutual) with Gabriel Heatter. Tune in tomorrow.

April 20,

I am constantly amazed at my powers of digression. I hope it isn't too confusing, but I suspect you are used to it by now. I also suspect that that you have heard some of these stories and thoughts before, but here's your chance to see them in living black and white.

At the moment, I think I will wind up tomorrow and put it in the mail. If you would like a weekly reader, let me know. If not, I'll save it. But I do intend to continue this, for me, as much as for you.

I mentioned that I have a clear (though colored) picture of my teens. I have a much less clear picture of my early childhood, and no recollection of my life before 5 or 6 years old. I have toyed with the idea of hypnosis to get me to talk about my earliest years.

It is even possible that those events of my early childhood were told to me by someone else, rather than remembered. Two memories that stay with me are both sad. I don't know how old I was, 4, 5, 6, but my mother went into the hospital for an operation and I stayed with Ruth and Arthur Kestenbaum during that period. I remember lying awake very early in the morning and feeling alone. Perhaps a few years after that I was in an after-school program at the Isaac Gerson Foundation Hebrew Day Nursery on Beck Street which was next door to Esther Goldstein's brother, Max Kevenoff. Again, I remember standing in the back yard—the outdoor play area of the nursery—and feeling cold and alone. I may have been 7. What I did at the nursery, I don't remember. Somehow the name "Miss Jean" remains with me as the nursery school teacher, like Rosebud.

But despite the fact that my father was dead, the country was in a depression, we were on relief and my mother must have been distraught, I don't remember being unhappy. We lived in a nice apartment in an elevator house, had nice furniture, we were never hungry; I wasn't aware of clothes, but I am sure I had warm clothes in the winter, and I had a bunch of friends around the block. When I try to remember my earliest friends, it is Larry Wilson, then Marvin Bernstein, Miltie Greenspan, then Edmund Handwerker—all living in 783, 777 and 775 Fox Street.

April 21,

I know I have made this observation before, but I do find it remarkable to realize that a few thousand people lived within a couple blocks of each other. The apartment houses averaged 4 to 8 apartments to a floor and were 5 or 6 stories high, and there were 5 or 6 buildings on one side of the street, and if there were 2 to 8 people per apartment, there's 5-700 people right there.

Therefore, there was always someone within your age group living close to you. And usually very similar to you. Their parents also came from Eastern Europe, worked in the garment industry or something similar.

April 26,

A discussion of latch-key children on TV got me to thinking about the fact that I was a latch-key child. In the morning, my mother went off to work, and I went off to school, I would eat lunch in school ("free lunch" for the poor kids on relief) and after school I was supposed to go to the nursery. When I was older, eight or nine, I would come home and play near the house until I had to go to Hebrew school, or my mother came home. At some point my mother entrusted me with a key, but there was a constant problem of my losing the key.

And there was the problem of getting to Hebrew school on time. Noone had a watch, Hebrew (we never said Hebrew school) was Monday through Thursday on the hour—4 pm, 5 pm, 6 pm, and Sunday morning—9 am, 10 am, 11 am. The first year, we learned to read and write the aleph bais, and the succeeding years were devoted to learning Hebrew through a simple text (Raishis Das?) and reading from the Chumash. Our teacher, Mr. Zinder, was knowledgeable, short-tempered and, I suspect, poorly paid. He also prepared the boys for Bar Mitzvah as well, after the last class. On Sundays, he would discuss history and customs, and even teach Yiddish. Occasionally he would reward students with a piece of chocolate from a five cent bar of Nestle's Crunch. I don't remember any girls in the classes. They were viewed as Bar Mitzvah preparation, and there were no Bas Mitzvahs in Orthodox Shuls.

The classes were in the basement of the shul: Congregation Beth David Agudath Achim, or the Fox Street, or the Hungarian Shul. The lower floor of the Synagogue was the "Bais Medresh" where the daily prayers were said and congregants studied Talmud. It was dingy, and there were rows of attached wooden folding chairs. About three-quarters of the way back, there was a curtain separating the women from the men. In the front, to the left of the Bima were tables where the men studied. And along the left side were two or three classrooms. I don't believe more than one classroom was ever used at a time, nor were there more than 10 or 12 students in a class.

Though I had no contact with Mr. Zinder after my Bar Mitzvah, even as a pre-teen youngster, I had the feeling that he was learned, sophisticated, and didn't observe all the rules of Shabbas and Kashruth. He wore his fedora in the style of Second Avenue Yiddish actors: with the brim turned down on the side, rather than in front. It was the depression, he had to make a living and I am sure he aspired to a higher calling. Looking

back, I regret the misbehavior of the students: hiding when Mr. Zinder concluded one class and was ready to teach the next one. There was a lot of acting up in class and I remember Mr. Zinder twisting the misbehaving boy's ear, but no hitting, either with a hand or ruler.

Hebrew was drudgery, but we all recognized that we had to endure it. I was vaguely aware that my mother pleaded poverty and that we paid something like a quarter a week. When it came time for my Bar Mitzvah, my mother asked for a reduced charge for a Saturday Bar Mitzvah. And the Shammash, Mr. Cohen, replied, "when you ask for bread, we will give you bread, but don't ask for cake. If you can't pay, have a Bar Mitzvah on Monday or Thursday." Somehow my mother came up with the money, not only for a Shabbas Bar Mitzvah, but for a catered lunch in the Shul for family and friends. She even sent out printed invitations modeled after my cousin Gabie's invitation.

I suspect I will run out of steam in the not too distant future, but for now these letters will come from time to time, for whatever it's worth. I shouldn't minimize my memories, and I am sharing them with you because I believe they are worth something.

Love,
Dad

May 19, (1983)

Dear Kids,

I see that the last communication was dated April 26, but since then I was involved in preparing for a meeting in Washington, and during that period, I had the opportunity to see you. Though we didn't talk much about the letter, no one said don't bother and so it is up to me to keep them coming and to make them coherent.

And that is all I wrote.

It is now March 24, 2005. I finished a piece about going to Bronx Park with my mother and read it to the Autobiographical Writing class yesterday. I hope to write two or three pieces a week. (I will be happy if I can consistently write one a week.) How they will all come together, I don't know. At the same time, I have been writing something about Mel which has been very hard.