

A FAMILY HISTORY AND A BAR MITZVAH SPEECH

by LAWRENCE DANIEL STERN

The speech was written in Yiddish by Mr. Birnboim, who was a student of the Torah, and who tutored the children of Jewish parents who wanted their children to understand their faith.

He taught Buddy and me the language and all about the history of the Jewish people, riding his bicycle from the North End of Winnipeg several times a month, because Mum and Dad felt that it was appropriate for their two boys to learn all about the history of the Jewish people, and to attempt to learn a reasonable amount of the written and spoken language of those who had come from the Pale of Settlement.

It should be remembered that only a part of the followers of Moses in their flight from Spain in 1492, went north east in the direction of Germany, and acquired the peculiar language called Yiddish, which had its roots in the German tongue. Those who fled East and South to the Mediterranean area and Africa, carried their native Spanish, and with time this became mixed with some words of Hebrew, and was called Ladino.

Dad and Mum spoke Yiddish to each other for the sake of privacy, but felt that it would be appropriate for their children to learn Yiddish from a bona fide teacher, even though Buddy and I understood most of what they were saying in Yiddish.

The Talmud Torah was a synagogue in Winnipeg's North End, which was populated mainly by peoples of Serbian, Croatian, Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish extraction) formed by a group of men, including Zalman Zaslavsky, (later Angelle), who had arrived from the Pale of Settlement, a zone created in approximately 1790, extending from Latvia on the Baltic Sea across Russian occupied East Prussia, Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria and much of the Ukraine down to the Black Sea, which included the city of Odessa.

In the 19th century Odessa, which existed on an old Greek settlement dating back to the pre-Christian era, was revitalized by Catherine the Great. The Pale (boundary) of Settlement formed by Catherine, Queen of all the

Russias, was devised as a way of blocking further penetration of the Russian territory by people who professed the Jewish faith, since there were few Jews in Central Russia which was for the most part composed of adherents to the Orthodox Church. Catherine wanted to avoid mixing with these different non-Christian people who nevertheless were potentially of value to Russia.

They were surrounded by Poles and Ukrainians who maintained a cordial dislike of these refugees from the Catholic Spanish Inquisition in the late 15th century, having fled to Holland in the North and Africa in the south, and Germany in the East.

Inevitably they migrated further East, and bowing to local hostility in the Germanic speaking portions of Europe, migrated to the Slavic area. The hostility of the local non-Jewish population ensured that many would choose emigration to flee the abuse and restrictions that clouded their existence.

Zalman had arrived in Winnipeg in 1903, with a young wife and a new boy child, Morris, who had been born in Odessa. Gertrude, my grandmother, and mother of Sara, who was my mother, had been raised in Odessa which, although anti-Semitic, was remarkably free of the restrictions placed on Jews elsewhere in Russia.

Zalman was born in Ekaterinoslav, later Dnepropetrovsk, at the site of the great achievement of the Bolsheviks, the hydroelectric dam across the Dneiper River. He journeyed south to Odessa, met and married Gertrude, (possibly an arranged marriage) and after she bore their first child, prevailed on her to emigrate with her new family to the New World, as he felt that conditions would eventually become intolerable for those of the Mosaic faith.

Gertrude reminisced occasionally about Odessa, which was a center of culture in Southern Russia, with theater, ballet, and orchestral music. She also remembered swimming in the Black Sea in the summers, and in general partaking of the pleasurable aspects of a cosmopolitan city.

Zalman, who was a student of the Torah, had no trade, but became a contractor, and built a number of houses in St. Vital, a suburb of Winnipeg, and later, enamored of the "fresh air" in St. James, built a house about 1916,

at 179 Oakdale Place, which was the house in which their family was raised, and where Buddy, Lynn, and I lived after 1936, when Zalman died of a urinary tract infection while under treatment in hospital.

I remember when I was 5 years of age, sitting on his lap as he taught me the rudiments of the Hebrew alphabet. I still remember Paul who had come into Winnipeg from Melville Saskatchewan, where he had a family medical practice, when he had heard of his father's illness, vigorously criticizing the care received by his father.

One must remember that no antibiotics existed prior to World War II, although Sulfonamides were discovered in Germany prior to the war probably associated with their clothing industry which included the use of dyes, Sulfonamides being a variant of aniline dyes. Alexander Fleming (later Sir Alexander Fleming) had discovered Penicillin in 1927, in England, as a result of observing a pale unpopulated area surrounding a zone of bacterial growth on some agar gel. It was, however, not available for civilian use until after the war was over in 1945.

When he was discharged from the Army in 1945, Uncle Paul gave Buddy and me some DDT bombs which the troops used in the jungles of Burma, and we ran through the clouds of mosquitoes on damp days with the DDT mist spraying continuously, laughing as the insects dropped by the thousands. Little did we know that the life saver DDT would be responsible for decimation of bird populations on the other side of the world, as it created fragile eggs in pregnant birds. Rachel Carson made her reputation by pointing out the negative aspects of so-called "advances".

From 1933 when the Weimar Republic had been replaced by the National Socialist (Nazi) Party with its absolutist rule of Adolph Hitler in Germany, the fate of all Jews in Germany and the rest of Europe became certain, and a number of letters from Dad to his family in Eastern Poland, a little village (shtetl) named Hozscha, were sent, urging his mother, brothers and sisters, to emigrate, and promising assistance with the cost of transportation. They resisted however, citing an "improvement" in conditions locally, and tempered no doubt by the natural reluctance of people to leave an area in which they could speak the local language.

By the time that his family perceived the ominous turn of events in Europe, the occupation of the Saar basin in the west, the Anschluss in Austria, and the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and finally the move East to occupy the Western portion of Poland, by Hitler, the dye was cast, and Dad's family could not escape, and though occasional letters carefully written with an eye toward the censor, came through, we in Canada could only await the inevitable horrific news.

It was in this context that I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah in March 1942. War had been declared by Canada following the lead of the mother country, England (September 3, 1939) on September 10, and although there was little movement on the Western Front until April, 1940, the German advance through Belgium, bypassing the Maginot Line, overwhelmed France in May, and Paris was captured in that month and France capitulated, and cooperated with Hitler for the rest of the War.

By 1942 most of the rest of Europe had been occupied by German forces, Denmark, Norway, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Crete, and Yugoslavia, and the Italians under Mussolini, sensing an imminent victory by the German forces, and anxious to annex part of the Savoy and Croatia, completed the annexation of most of the rest of Europe, including Albania. Germany and the Soviet Union had divided up Poland between them in 1939, Hitler pausing in his advance, Stalin, hoping thereby to gain time for restoration of his mutilated army, rid of its officer corps by the paranoid behavior of its leader. Stalin had done some preparation of his own, waging war against Finland and gaining Petsamo in the north and Kronstadt in the south, and the entire circumference of Lake Ladoga, to protect Leningrad. The Finnish army, vastly outnumbered, temporarily defeated and humiliated the Russians, who had a paranoid cruel leader, while they were protecting their independence.

Remember if you please, that France had been one of the major colonial powers in North Africa, and the Germans therefore were able to move into North Africa and the Italians retained Somaliland. Spain, an ally of Hitler, although it remained technically neutral, was German in all but name, though Portugal retained a friendship with England, strong ties that went back to the

rescue by Wellington from Napoleon in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Roosevelt by this time was leading a United States that had been sustaining England since early 1940, suffering enormous losses from U Boats which were provided with the convoy routes by spies in the US, recovering at the same time from the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, while the British and French were being evicted from South East Asia by the advancing Japanese forces.

Buddy and I pored over the newspaper daily watching the progress of the fighting, the inexorable advance of German and Japanese forces, and learned to shoot in the basement of the high school, using gas masks and trench mortars. We fully expected to be invaded, joined the Army cadets, and were prepared to fling ourselves into battle as soon as we turned 17. In our innocence, we looked upon war as a brilliant adventure.

We listened silently and hopefully to the speeches of Churchill and Roosevelt on the radio, and in summer, from loudspeakers broadcasting from the pavilion in Assiniboine Park across the river from where we lived. These two remarkable leaders had us in the palm of their hands as we contemplated the disasters befalling so many nations.

It was in this atmosphere that I entered the Talmud Torah on that day in early March 1942. For some reason, I have no idea why, the congregation was packed, and my speech, (memorized by endless repetition, was so fluent that at night I talked in my sleep as I roared at the right places before an unseen audience) captured the mood of the audience perfectly.

TRANSLATION OF THE SPEECH WHICH WAS WRITTEN IN YIDDISH

Given in early March, 1942, at the Talmud Torah Synagogue, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, by Daniel Lawrence Stern, eldest son of Morris and Sara Stern, who turned 13 years of age on March 5, 1942.

Rabbis, my dear parents, and honored guests: today is the holiest day of my life. Today I celebrate my thirteenth birthday, my Bar Mitzvah. I become a member of the Jewish people. I take upon myself all the holy duties and

commandments of a Jewish boy. With deep earnestness, and full appreciation of my duties, today I approach my role in the world of adult Jewry.

But today I come at a time when the Jewish and human skies are very cloudy; angry winds blow and howl! Wild angry beasts in the disguise of men, armed with the most modern weapons, to enslave the world!

The earth is filled with the cries and groans of millions of the tired, suffering, and bereaved. The oceans are stained with human blood. The skies are filled with machines that fly, kill and destroy the people and their works! Wild beasts from the depths of the forests, mad spirits from the darkness of the night have come out, taken over, and wish to enslave the world.

But not forever will the long dark night last! The day must, and will come! Righteousness and decency must and will prevail! The wild beasts of the darkness will vanish. Truth will return to the world, and the Jews, the faithful bearers and spreaders of light and the Torah, which espouses the finest principles of freedom, humanity, and goodness, must take their rightful place in a free, righteous, and happy society!

We have read today in the Haftorah from our great prophet Isaiah, the prophet who lived in times of goodness and evil, his prophecies about bad times, and toward the end, about the beautiful, splendid days that would follow! ---when nations and peoples will live together in peace, friendship and happiness, is reflected in today's Haftorah.

Said the Prophet, in God's name "this nation have I created to praise my name, to spread light and truth, but if you have gone to seek other Gods, Gods of wood, of metal, man-made Gods, who are unable to think or help, if you will find and correct your mistakes, all will be well again."

The Prophet concluded: "the skies, the earth, the forests, with all their trees, will be filled with happiness and song, and God will deliver and free his people Israel."

Rabbis, on this most holy day of my life, I want to assure you that our Torah and its teachings will guide and inspire me throughout my life, and I will

always be a good and true son to my parents, my people, and my faith.

Also, I want to express my deep gratitude to my dear parents who have raised me until now, and to hope that they will continue to do the best that they can for me in the future. I wish for you, my dear parents, to live out your years in peace and happiness; may you have much nachas from me and your other children, and hopefully we will see the end of Hitler and all other foes, and a quick redemption for all Jews, and all mankind.

AMEN!!!

ADDENDUMS:

As it happened, we found out later from a letter written by the lone survivor of the village, and mailed by air letter from Australia, my paternal grandmother and her family, were shot with all the villagers by a battalion of SS soldiers who marched into the town on a July 1942 day, with specific orders to eliminate all Jewish inhabitants. They were made to stand on the edge of a trench dug for that purpose, and were shot, and fell into the ditch.

On the day of my father's Bar Mitzvah in 1914, his mother, Elke Friedman Shternshus put him on a horse or donkey, I do not know which, put in his hand a small bottle of vodka, for the Rabbi, and sent him, alone, to the synagogue in the neighboring town, which he did not name, to lead the congregation in prayer, and to be accepted into the society of active members of the male community.

His father had emigrated to Canada in 1910, without his mother (she was forbidden to cross the frontier owing to infection with Trachoma). He continued on to Canada, while she remained home to care for the rest of the family, two sisters, and two brothers. Myrtle, the youngest sister, was brought over to Canada later, by my father Morris, and served as one of two bridesmaids to Sara Angelle (Zaslavsky) when she married my father.

It is difficult to be certain of the effect of the destruction of European Jewry, but the effect on Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower was overwhelming, and shortly after the founding of the United Nations, at the end of World War II, the UN on November 29, 1947, recommended that an independent state be created under the terms of the United Nations partition plan, which created within the borders of the Palestine mandate an approximate division of the area between Arab and Jew based on a majority of the population settled on the land.

At that time, immigration, which had been tightly controlled by the United Kingdom under the terms of the League of Nations mandate after World War I, was vastly increased, as the internment camps in Europe, filled with refugees from the War, most of whom did not want to return to the USSR, were no longer impeded by the British. On the 29th of November 1948, the State of Israel was declared to be in existence, by David Ben Gurion, and the United States led by Harry Truman, immediately recognized the new State. The Arab nations surrounding Israel promptly invaded, and almost cut the territory in half, and the US and the UK together, ordered the Arab armies to stop in their tracks, and a de facto division of the former mandate was created.

It was in such catastrophe and chaos that we lived at that time, and in a prairie town, Lawrence Daniel Stern turned 13 in March 1942.