

As you read this I will have crossed the edge of a precipice. The fall will be gentle, cushioned by wide straps, so hardly a bungee jump, and unlike my bungee jump there will be no elasticity to pull me back.

I was eighty when I went to New Zealand and signed a declaration I was of sound mind and leapt off a bridge with my faith in physics enhanced by a greater belief that I was sure to survive. The day before, over the greenest pasture I had ever seen, I floated from the sky like an angel. Strapped to a heavysset instructor, I had voluntarily jumped from an aircraft. I tucked my legs up on the landing as I didn't trust my hips.

Why this bravado?

I was testing my beliefs. For hadn't a rabbi told me as a child that I would live into my nineties and die in a country I had never heard of? And this I believed, yet in all other measures I had lived my life as an atheist. I felt safe; in Europe when I was growing up no one had heard of New Zealand. Just as those in New Zealand had never heard of Łódź in Poland.

But then, you see, as you read this you are reading a transcription of my voice as I dictate my memoirs into a computer. Even the "you see" I added is a figure of speech and not something I imagine an editor would allow through, so pardon my inability to remain true to the medium.

I will not have the opportunity to edit or to modify. I only get one go at this, but then we only get one go at life. All we can do is seek understanding or forgiveness. In my case, perhaps I deserve neither.

But from whom, do you ask? The ones I have injured are no more and, even though I should be saying the *Shema Israel* – the Jewish version of the Lord's prayer, one even recalled by us non-believers – as I toddle towards the pit, I am yet to find any way

of believing that this world, that my being, that all the shades of humankind, were created by anything but the equally random chances involved when a sperm meets an ovum. Is the matriarchal Jewish lineage anything more than a form of animal husbandry?

I have read many Holocaust memoirs in recent months. Don't ask me why, for it is not as you might suppose. How can reading about another's life help you tell your own? These memoirs should prepare me for my task, but they all suffer from predictability. They all start the same way. "I was born in" is nearly as deadly a phrase as "It was a dark and stormy night".

Why should it matter where I was born? Our birth is an accident, and its place, as hallowed as it becomes in forming our allegiances, is but a similar accident. Where my mother came into labour mattered only in that not so long ago we had limited ability to relocate ourselves. Prior to the motor vehicle, my antecedents may have travelled no more in a day than twenty kilometres from their homes. Their kingdom was limited by the horse. Now a woman could go into labour in Melbourne and give birth to a potential US president in Hawaii, were an airline to be so accommodating.

Having said that, a child born in Łódź in 1915 faced a different future to that of a child born in London or Los Angeles or Lima, and yet by the time that child was an adult, if they were resourceful – which usually means wealthy – they were able to move from Łódź to London to Los Angeles or to Lima. A spoiler alert, as they say these days when reviewing a movie or book – I have never been to Lima.

As much as I wished to avoid it, I have given you a clue and succumbed to the predictable. I was that child born in Łódź, in the Russian-controlled Congress of Poland, in 1915, the coldest January in memory, they said, the midwife blocked by snowdrifts, arriving just in time to cut my cord. Her haste is perhaps why my belly button seems uneven, deeper on one side where the blue fluff accumulates. Łódź was my whole world but not even the capital or largest city in Poland, and 1915 was but midway through the war to end all wars. A war that would barely make the news in Peru, I suspect.

Apologies, dear reader, I have barely started my tale and here

I am in my familiar position, atop a soapbox, carried along by my own rhetoric. Please forgive me – the net of argument at times catches but minnows and then presents them as a hearty meal.

The biographies I read next introduced us to parents and childhood memories, as if these are not somewhat universal. It is only the most recent of children whose parents' genetic material comes from a test tube or petri dish and a pipette. I assure you that at the time of my birth the motor vehicle was a novelty, cobbled streets were decorated with horse manure (except when used by James Joyce, I have found *shit* is a word of the later twentieth century) and babies were born at home. Test tubes then were used to create ever more potent mustard gas and explosives, to destroy, not to create, life. Do you find it ironic that the inventor of dynamite has given his name to the ultimate peace prize?

In Poland, each family had a ghost or two, a baby that failed to survive, courtesy of croup or measles or the myriad of infections on offer from shit-covered streets. Far more lives have been saved by sanitation than by surgery. Our ghosts were dutifully recorded inside the cover of the family Bible in the biblical calendar. So and so was born three days before Pesach and died at the age of eighteen months a week after Simchat Torah.

But you see, already my inability to tell the truth is twisting my tongue. My parents were barely religious, their synagogue appearance money, if such were paid, would have been meagre. They only attended for the two major high holidays. Could get them both over in a fortnight. Pesach, the Passover festival, was a dinner with matzoh and more than the requisite four glasses of wine, Simchat Torah was a party and more wine. Neither was a time to enter the synagogue and meet the disapproval of those tallit-cloaked men clucking their tongues at them as they held the wrong book at the wrong page and sat when they should stand and stood when they should sit. Today, secular would be the word.

My father was a petty industrialist whose library included the Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' first Polish edition, and whose son was the only reader of this book and so the only one influenced. Then, as now, a library was created for show. How better to suggest you were well read than have the *Communist Manifesto* stand

shoulder to shoulder with Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. In my father's bookcase, the *Manifesto* stood out as his only political tract. A pity – I may have benefited from some balance, but little my father did benefited me.



*My mother holding her firstborn, my sister Chaya.
I have no photo of her with me.*

My mother was but a sepia photograph on the mantel above the fireplace. In her stead, my aunt, a wall-eyed spinster with few teeth and breath to match, my father's sister Ida, brought us up. Why, you ask? Not why Ida was a spinster, for her physical attributes were not overcome by the wonderful personality some can compensate with. Aunt Ida remained a spinster for the reason many remain single. They are not companions one would choose. And we two children, my older sister and I, did not choose her.

You meant, why we were brought up by any other than our mother? In breaking with the tradition of children dying of diseases that we could now treat and cure with a five-day course of antibiotics, my mother died from appendicitis when I was a week short of my fourth birthday. Perhaps it would have been better if a surgeon had been summoned rather than Aunt Ida, whose experience as a nurse taught her not to make decisions.

I still remember the wailing of the women gathered in our home, but of my mother I remember nothing. All these years later and I still grieve for the one I never knew.

I still have the photo. It has been digitised and I assume is now immortal because it is on my Facebook page. I joined Facebook not long ago and of course there were no friends of my age out there. I recorded my birthday, the ninth of January 1915, and my smattering of followers will get a birthday reminder to wish me well for as long as Facebook lives.

You are shocked – by what – that I am computer literate? It is merely another form of literacy and I have been blessed to have that part of the brain that masters languages and is receptive to new words. A few weeks in a country and I was well on the way, not only with the vocabulary but also their patois or slang. Nothing shows a greenhorn up as much as the inability to understand a swear word or detect when they're being mocked. I have picked up languages like others can play a tune after hearing it once. I confess, however, I am tone-deaf and my only instrument is my tongue.

Words require currency. For example, I briefly owned – sorry, part-owned – a computer billing service in the 1970s, with punch cards, mainframes and rows of data entry clerks. Who now knows what those words and phrases mean?

But you see the issues of dictating rather than writing and re-editing? I have jumped forward sixty years, something the biographies I read never did. Does this make me postmodern or just a clumsy storyteller?

I was born on Zawadzka Street, number 23. I cannot find it now on that new universal street directory, Google Maps. Is there a point in giving you the address of our family home when you would need a pre-war map of Łódź to find it? In my time there were no horses and carts travelling each street and photographing the buildings to make Golem Maps. You see, I again have broken my narrative to make a lame joke. The golem is not a Polish entity but one that belongs in Prague, which is closer to the middle of Europe and prone to such monsters. Can you find Transylvania on Google Maps? I ask you.

Of 23 Zawadzka Street, I feel I know every centimetre because

that was my universe as a child. Yet I can smell and hear the address better than I can see it.

In Australia, when you say “family home” you picture a house on a block of land, rose bushes, lawn, a Hills hoist, some cheeky garden gnomes, much like my home here in Caulfield. In Łódź, our home was an apartment, third floor, walk up, with a cellar and a coal chute. The coal would need to be carried up those stairs. All my schoolfriends had similar homes.

Before you have scenes of *Oliver Twist* pass before your eyes, I never once carted the coal. We had daily servants; ours was a larger apartment in a better street and my father needed to keep up appearances. There was a large kitchen but no family room. This was long before TV required its own space and children usurped the needs of adults. The adults had their lounge which I sat in only when guests came on the weekends, sneaking chocolate-covered prunes off the low tables, listening when I pretended to be absorbed in a tin car I was pushing along the carpet beside me. My eyes would water from the cloud of smoke pushing out the breathable air. Not from the chimney, that was swept quite regularly, but from the cigarettes that never left the adults’ mouths.

Who were these guests? I now wonder. Mostly men coming for a glass of schnapps, to laugh with or at my father whose petty capitalism and need to keep face would have him fill the lounge most Sunday afternoons with fellow merchants and chancers. They didn’t bring their wives, either out of sympathy or to avoid confronting my father’s taste in female companions. When conversation ran out they would play cards around the dining table for a few kopeks. All the while smoking.

The lounge room smelled of smoke-filled drapes and dusty brocade. There was no plastic to cover the chairs, for plastic was many years into the future. Even Bakelite was yet to arrive. But then, like a dial-up modem, you probably haven’t heard of Bakelite.

The furniture was dark polished mahogany, no light timbered Biedermeier or low-line Bauhaus. The table had six heavy chairs with horsehair-filled leather seats. There was a row of oil paintings on the walls. A series of smudgy dark landscapes that set off the white panelled walls and high ceilings. Perhaps they had been

painted by my mother. I recall my father saying she was artistic.

On one wall was the only bookcase. Books in Yiddish and Polish, cloth-covered editions, many with other's names inside, borrowed not returned, their spines cracked as the glue hardened and pages fell loose. The communist tracts handed out to my father in the nearby square were piled on the floor between his chair and the fireplace. Instead of reading them, he used them to light the kindling. In summer, the pile increased and I had fresh material to read every few days. I learned of the revolution, the communist victory, of Father Stalin and the heroism of his Red Army.

Łódź had been a ping-pong ball in middle Europe, forfeited in the defeat of Napoleon, ruled by the Russians for over a hundred years, and who knew whether the game was over? I was four before I lived in independent Poland, yet the Russians were so close, us Jews could still smell the stench of vodka and vomit, recall the boots and bayonets of the Cossacks and, with some hope, wonder whether the miracle of communism heralded the arrival of the messiah.

I smuggled the books into my bedroom one at a time, though I'm not sure why. My father may have been proud I was reading the library when he hadn't. I learned to love his Yiddish books. Later, I realised they belonged to my mother – my father would sit with a book in his lap smoking a cigarette for hours at a time and yet made the mistake of not turning the page. This the young child at his feet noted. What my father dreamt of I cannot tell you, for we rarely spoke.

It was the kitchen I have the most vivid memory of. That is where a young child lives when cared for by an often-absent aunt and a busy servant. A tiled stove from floor to ceiling. Large white tiles with a green pattern – I once copied it with a pencil and tracing paper. A magnificent piece of engineering, the stove was, a black iron top, gleaming white enamel doors, a copper rail along its front to hang utensils, and a small ash container with a flap door, behind which the glowing ashes were as much a hazard to small hands as the stovetop. Today the fashion is for mirrored splashbacks behind benches. Our stove had a mirrored wall behind it which needed cleaning every few hours. How little we have learned in the last century.

The kitchen had running water, which was unusual at the time. In winter, of course, the pipes would freeze so the only way water would run was when it was carried in haste. Under the kitchen bench we kept two large white buckets, filled to the brim, for the winter. The buckets were filled for the summer as well, for fire was a constant hazard in an upstairs apartment.

Our maid Tanya was Jewish and taught me Yiddish. My aunt spent little time with me as a child, preferring my older sister, Chaya. Tanya employed a peasant girl to carry the water, the coal and every mealtime to do the washing-up by hand. Tanya was the maître d' of the family. It was Tanya who stood at the front doorway of the apartments and haggled with women bringing fresh eggs, butter and bread to our door. The supermarket came to us. The chores she chose for herself revolved around cooking, especially baking, when she would sing as she rolled the dough, and playfully tap my wrist when I dipped my none-too-clean finger in the cake mix. Only my aunt beat me.

My kindergarten was on the first floor of 1 Zermakiego, just around the corner. Tanya would take me. It was a private class with wooden toys and a severe woman in black with spectacles who frightened us daily.



*I still recall Tanya shaving my head
for the first day of school.*

At seven, I started public school at number 9 in our street. Perhaps I was precocious for I found the learning easy. I am going to tell you – I came dux of my school. (You may think I can tell you anything, for who is there to check the facts?) To succeed, you need the drive that comes from competition and I soon identified my competitors – Shmuel with the stutter and Herschel who was already a scientist. They were driven, like me, and regularly had perfect scores in mathematics, where perfection can be measured. I was a linguist, mastering Yiddish, Polish and Russian. As we progressed through the years we became political opponents and friends. Yes, friends, for shouldn't you keep your enemies close, and don't we often befriend those who we admire even as we try to usurp them?

The school was mostly attended by secular Jews, students of the left. The religious children went to their cheders and Yeshivot where they were taught to be rabbis. I did say Łódź was a city with smoke-spewing mills, knitting factories and the like? For every wealthy Jew there were hundreds of poor workers barely existing in their poverty. They also read Karl Marx and, if nothing else, he led them to have dreams.

My classmate Shmuel, at ten, was a Zionist. He attended the associated youth movement and had aspirations of going to Palestine. He fell away in his studies. Perhaps Shmuel went with the thousands in the 1930s or perhaps he stayed in Łódź to his fate. I do not know.

Herschel's father had been involved in the 1905 rebellion against the factory owners – heroic and futile, with hundreds killed by the forces of the Tsar. The Tsar failed to learn of the power of dissent, but his people learned to strike only when the enemy is weak. History does not reward failure and the Łódź revolution is but a footnote to a footnote. Herschel's father survived, unable to work. His broken bone festered and he limped to the school with a putrid smell I still recall. He was the author of many of the pamphlets my father used to light the fire. Naturally, his son was an ardent communist as well.

What could I do? There was no point in sharing an aspiration with an opponent. I went to the first of many SKIF meetings, then

began to argue with Herschel. This was the youth movement of the Bund, the red scarf worn proudly. And the Bund was the most popular group in Łódź at the time. Both the communists and the Bund had no time for the Zionists and were unified by socialist ideals.

Herschel, like me, dreamed of Stalin and Russia and the purity of communism. But I was also torn, for I loved my language, Yiddish, and felt this was the unifier for the Jewish people. Follow Stalin and we would no longer be Jews. Stalin wanted no variations in devotion or belief. Follow those Zionists and we would have to occupy and usurp the land of another, speak an invented tongue full of invented words written in the letters of the Old Testament. I understood our long history with the land of Israel and its importance in our religion. But the Zionists were not religious. Instead of black robes, fur hats and synagogues, they preferred shorts, short-sleeved shirts and kibbutzim. For the Zionist, sweat today trumped a prayer for tomorrow.

Only the Bundists allowed us to have it all. We could remain as Jews of the diaspora, survive as we had for centuries with our fellow Polish countrymen and allow ourselves the freedom of Yiddish while partaking in Polish society. Our literature and theatre and poetry and music would continue to flourish and give us our identity. Why did we need Russian or Hebrew? As I speak I understand how strange this debate seems in a post-Holocaust, State of Israel world. But please forgive me. The year I became a Bundist was 1925. I was ten years old.

The enmity between our groups grew in the school playground. Herschel floundered with Russian and I made a point of outshining him. I did well enough to graduate to high school – known as a gymnasium in Poland – and by having the top marks in my school was given a position in the first Jewish high school in Łódź. The most prestigious Jewish school in the city.

I never went to that school.