

## **Chapter 2: Haifa (1957-1968)**

In 1957, when our ship docked at the port of Haifa, Jewish immigrants, the “surviving burning embers”, as defined by the cliché de jour, were received in Israel with warmth and affection. More than half of Israel’s population was made of such surviving pieces of driftwood. You could see them everywhere: metal or gold teeth or no teeth in their mouths, numbers tattooed on their arms; talking Romanian, Polish, or Yiddish; selling corn on the cob boiled in large pots over open fires on the street corners, or schlepping through the neighborhoods with large sacks on their shoulders, screaming “*Alte sachen kaufen!*” (“Buying old things!”), like they had done before in the *shtetels* which were no more.

We have arrived in Israel as part of the mass exodus of the Polish Jewry which took place in 1957 but our circumstances were relatively privileged. My father was related to the “clan” of Aba Khoushy (1898-1969), then Haifa’s most influential mayor, and that helped a lot. We were not horded, like others, into the *maabarot* (temporary dwellings for new immigrants, constructed at the edge of towns to accommodate the arriving masses) but settled in a rented garden cottage at the outskirts of Haifa. And a few months later we moved, ahead of a long waiting list, to a new apartment block at the foot of Mount Carmel. A relatively modest position was awaiting my father from the first month of arrival; but with his inherent ambition, charisma, and the “backup”, he started to climb rapidly. We were the first to be connected to a private telephone line in our new suburb and my father was one of the first owners of a privately imported car in Haifa—this was the end of the “Austerity era” (*Tzena*). The car was a British made Vauxhall Victor, 1958—a total disaster! And three years later my father could afford a large; newly built apartment, in a self standing, red-shingled house, on the upper slopes of the Carmel, overlooking the city and port. Clearly, our situation was privileged; but at those ascetic times I was not pleased with the relative affluence of my father, and the conditions we lived in. The opposite was true: I was timid about what we had in comparison with those surrounding us. “Your father is stinking rich” my friends in school

accused me. "No, he's not", I would defend myself. "You have nine rooms in your house" they would mock me. "It is because my farther needs space to see his patients" I would retort. "Aba Khoushy, Aba Khoushy gave it all to you", the kids would accuse, referring to the almighty mayor; that would begin a fistfight. Times have changed: today's kids are proud of the elevated socioeconomic status of their family but at that time in young Israel I was bashful about it.

Within two weeks of my arrival I was placed in the first grade of the elementary school. I could not understand a word of Hebrew, nor could I decipher the funny alphabet they drew on the blackboard. But the kids were nice to me, competing with each other to see who could be kinder to the poor survivor who had arrived in this warm paradise—the "land of milk and honey" according to the Bible and the popular song taught in kindergarten—from what they conceived to represent Hell.

There was only one little problem and that was my foreskin: in Poland, under the communist regime traditional circumcision had not been accepted; therefore I arrived in Israel uncircumcised. "You have a funny prick," a boy commented at the school urinal. A few months later I underwent circumcision under general anesthesia. Yet a few months later I demanded that my Polish name, Marek, is changed to a Hebrew one. "The kids make fun of me," I complained, "they call me *Marak* (soup in Hebrew). I came up with "Moshe"—like the popular one-eyed national hero Moshe Dayan. My parents preferred the name "Meir" but complied.

I had to repeat the first grade but then, after a momentous intellectual effort during the summer vacation, I passed an examination that landed me directly in the third grade. This represented, however, my scholastic swan song because henceforth I would be an academic disaster. My performance had been so appalling that during the final year of elementary school my parents were advised by the director of my school (*Leo Beck*) that continuing into high school would be out of the question: "A child with such limited resources should enter a professional school for apprentices, to learn a trade

such as carpentry or plumbing.” My father however persisted in trying to accommodate me in another “good” high school”: *Chugim*, where my older sister was already excelling in her studies. I remember the interview with the grave, white haired head master. “Who is your favorite Hebrew poet?” he asked.

“Nachman Bialik”, I said.

“Which one of his poems do you like best?”

“My father’, I think...”

“Well, Moshe, take this copybook and write down a brief essay about that poem—anything which comes into your mind. Here, take this pen.”

I sat in an empty classroom for an hour, scribbling a few pages. I really liked the poem and I thought that what I was writing is a masterpiece. I handed the completed “treatise” to the headmaster. He eyed it rapidly and said sternly: “Very good Moshe. Thank you very much. Now go home and we’ll be in touch with your father.”

I never learned what the headmaster had to say to my father verbatim, but I was made to understand that my little “masterpiece ” had been considered an utter disaster—a work of someone who is intellectually challenged for his age. I was 12 years old.

My father, who by then had already established himself in town, managed—I do not know how much effort it involved—to place me in the worst high school in town. But even there my performance was atrocious. Many years later, one night in 1992, in Haifa, I was called to operate on a man suffering from intestinal obstruction. I immediately recognized him as Moshiko, a stupid kid from my elementary school. Now, thirty years later, he did not recognize me. When I introduced myself he exclaimed: “You—a surgeon? And I thought you were a retard!”

Until today I dream about failing at examinations, about not being prepared, about being asked questions and not knowing what to say. I wake up and thank the Lord for not having to go to school anymore. So many times I was being called to the blackboard only to be humiliated by the teacher in front of the class. I remember how one of my teachers handed out

results of a test in Hebrew grammar; he put a sardonic smile on his face and said: "And as usual our Mr. Schein received the lowest score ever recorded in the annals of this school! 17%!" The class erupted in wild laughter; I smiled like a fool—I would never show that I am upset. I played the happy imbecile. Those years are not something that I can fondly remember.

However, towards the final year of high school, I took myself in my hands—as they say in Hebrew—and for the first time in my life I started to study seriously. And to everybody's surprise I managed to matriculate—passing *all* the final examinations. Not with flying colors but with a reasonable average.

What was the clinical etiology of my "learning disabilities"? An attention deficit disorder? Perhaps, one day, if I continue in what Günter Grass called "peeling the onion" (of one's life) I will dwell on it.

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What about our family life? Ours was a typical "new upper middle class Ashkenazi Israeli family"—what would today be considered "belonging to the 'elite'". My father was working in the hospital and my mother functioning as a dedicated *Hausfrau*. My father would come home at noon, lunch, have a siesta, and then see private patients in his study until late afternoon. My parents entertained frequently at home: Polish style—in summer on the balcony overlooking the sea; in winter inside—the rooms full of cigarette smoke (both my parents smoked like a chimney and so did their guests), lots of tasty food (Polish dishes) and booze, Scotch being the favorite. Late at night, through the my bedroom walls, I could hear the laughter and rowdy jokes when the men started playing cards (poker); for my parents' generation it was like being together again in *Mittleuropa* before or during the war.

My parents were not their children's friends, like many today's parents are; like we try to be with our own sons. They were warm, loving, caring but—much more so my father—rather aloof. When not busy at work or socializing he would sit for hours, read "heavy" books and smoke, or smoke and read. It does not seem to me now that he and I spoke much to each

other—if we did my memory did not register it as being “significant”. And when I was becoming mature enough to appreciate and apply his wisdom he has left us. But I remember spending long evening hours listening to conversations he was having with his friends; the prevailing topic was politics—my father was an ardent member of the center left *Mapai* party that later became the Labor. All his life he was a fierce socialist.

He had been forty years old when I was born; already as a child I remember him puffing and panting when we were walking on the beach, or swimming together, as a result of his crippling emphysema. When I was ten years old he had suffered his first heart attack, it was then when in my child’s mind I began to realize that his life span is limited. Each night in bed, I remember, saying, “please God, let my father live as long as possible.”

The four of us used to lunch and dine together almost daily. Like in Europe, lunch was the main culinary event of the day: always soup, meat or fish, desert; and wine on Shabbat. In summer, on Saturdays, the family used to spread out on the beach under the shade of a wide tent; in winter we often gathered mushrooms on the green slopes of the Carmel. Saturday was frequently the “restaurant day”—always in one of Haifa’s, Akko’s or Nazareth’s superb Arab eateries. But the greatest Arab food was served in Samur’s house in the Druze-Arab village *Shfaram*, at the foothills of Lower Galilee. After my father had repaired the fractured spine of a young Druze called Samur, we have become frequent Saturday guests to his home village, where we were being shepherded from one house to another, each member of the extended Samur family competing on who will host and feed the great *Doktor* from Haifa. The numerous visits to the village—I was occasionally dispatched to live a week or so with the Samur family, when my parents went vacationing in Europe—left a pleasurable imprint in my mind: the old stony Arab houses on the slope of the hill basking in the soft, or harsh, sun; sheep, chickens and little children loitering the narrow footpaths; old men in baggy, skirt-like white trousers, sitting, smoking on their front porches. And that distinctive and alluring smell of an Arab village: a mishmash of dung, vegetation, and hay, wood fire on which, in the little courtyards, fresh pita

bread was being baked. Together with the little Druze boys I would ride on small donkeys down to the stony fields where we picked up and ate fresh, green chickpeas. In summer we would select the largest watermelon in the field, fracture it with a stone, and gorge ourselves on its cool, sweet, watery innards. And each visit in the village culminated in a prolonged, unforgettable, feast, in the best Druze-Arab tradition. Samur and his family occasionally reciprocated with a visit to Haifa; his wife and mother, in traditional Druze attire would carry baskets loaded with pita bread, home made olive oil and various fresh products from the village and the feast would be repeated on our own dining room table. Our neighbors would raise their eye brows: "What are these village Arabs doing at Professor Schein's house?" But my father cherished such multi-cultural relationships and with time he has become the unofficial "medical Godfather" of the Druze villages in northern Israel. I believe that the close contact with the Arab village early in my life—the majority of young Israeli Jews never have a chance to socially interact with the Arabs or Druzes—helped to develop an attitude of respect to their culture and even fondness. Later in my life I took part in battles and skirmishes with the "other side"—they shot at me and I shot back at them. But I have never felt any sense of hatred or contempt that is still prevailing on both sides of the chronic conflict.

My parents were secular—we did not observe any religious Jewish laws (my father used to visit the synagogue only once a year—at Yom Kippur, listening to the opening prayer *Kol Nidrei*, not from inside, but through the door or window) and so during the soccer season, on Saturday afternoons, my father and me attended regularly the games played by the home team *Hapoel Haifa* —my father served as the team's orthopedic surgeon. Whenever one of the players was hurt, my father would be summoned to the field on the stadium's announcement system. It made me very proud, raising my prestige at school, as I was able to boast to my colleagues that my father is the Doc of the soccer stars.

At least once a year my parents vacationed overseas—a luxury in those days; they traveled by boat to Italy and then hopped through Europe's

usual touristy spots. We, the kids, were left behind: I, on a summer camp or in the *kibbutz*, *my sister*—I do not recall where. But there were strains between my parents: my father was quite a womanizer and his poor health and volatile temper must have frazzled my mother. As a child and teenager I sensed the sporadic tensions between them, learning about details much later on—it is only when becoming adults we are curious about our parents' inner lives and who really they are or were.

My sister Sylvia, only three years my senior, but much more mature—or so it seemed to be—was living her life apart, rarely involved in our weekend outings. Unlike me she did very well in school and had a tremendously active social life style, being constantly chased by tall and hirsute young men. But already then she was extremely moody, susceptible to rages, dramas and tantrums. I recall glass doors violently slammed, broken and having to be repeatedly replaced. In retrospect: it heralded a relatively tragic and short life for my poor and bright sister. I believe that both my sister and me represented to our parents a constant source of qualms: she because of her behavior and I due to my “retardation.”

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According to Ivan Bunin, the human memory not only helps us to make some sense of our lives by sifting the significant events in our past from the insignificant, but also poeticizes the past, which acquires then a certain legendary quality—the so-called “poetry of life.”

So the small Polish boy rapidly shed off his Central European-ness, his “otherness,” and did whatever he could to fit in. No more long trousers—only khaki ultra shorts; navy blue or khaki shirts, always short-sleeved, hanging loose over the belt; and “Bible” sandals, never with socks. He tried to imitate the *kibbutzniks* with whom he spent his summer vacations and whom he adored. There was nothing more exciting for him than to wake up at dawn, before the cruel August sun started to bake the *Yezreel valley*, ride on the tractor with his much admired *kibbutznik* cousins Yossi, or Bari (later killed in reserve army service, 1967) down to the orange groves and, barefooted, ankles deep in mud, rearrange the heavy, rusty pipes of the

irrigation system. Then up to the kibbutz, to the communal dining room, where each of the sun-scorched and famished farmers was elaborately working on his breakfast salad.

*You chop onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and radishes into small pieces, and then throw in some fresh parsley. You help yourself to two peeled, hard-boiled eggs and fracture them over the salad. Splash the heap with a generous helping of olive oil and sour cream, add salt, pepper, and hot paprika, and smear a few thick slices of dark bread with a generous layer of butter. A few glasses of fresh milk, the fat still foaming on the surface, and back to the fields.*

In the late afternoon, when the sweltering valley cooled, he would relax at the kibbutz's swimming pool, watching with evolving interest the deeply bronzed bodies of the yellow-haired northern European girls who used to volunteer in the kibbutz. Surely those nymphets brought back in his subconscious the much earlier images of the fair and statuesque Magda and Ursula throwing him around on the couch in Lodz. But the boy was timid and awkward when it came to the other sex. He engaged in a few platonic love affairs—in most instances the subjects of his "love" were not aware of it—but it was not until he became a soldier that he had a taste of a woman's body.

When he was 16 years old the boy was dispatched by his parents to a summer school in the quaint and rustic Isle of Man in the middle of the Irish Sea—to improve his English skills and add a worldly layer to his provincial habits. The school was combined with a summer camp for teenagers from London—packed with heavily made-up and promiscuous English girls. He remembers an episode at dinner: a thin and wild looking girl, her name was Terry, suddenly placed her small hand under the table, starting to knead his crotch. But he did not realize what she was doing and why; he continued eating; she lifted her hand and uttered with disgust: "what a queer!" Later he consulted the dictionary to find out what "queer" stands for. This is how naïve he was.

And gradually he was becoming an ardent patriot. As early as elementary school the (alleged) last words of national hero Yosef

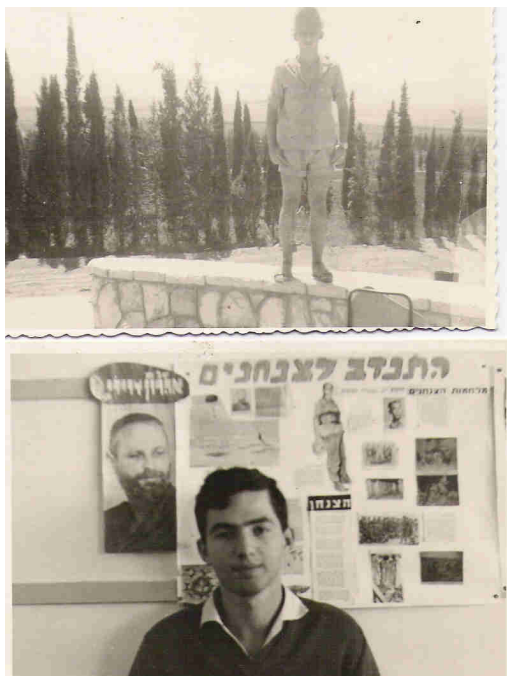
Trumpeldor, who had been fatally injured during a skirmish with Arabs in the Galilee in 1920, were repeatedly drummed into his young brain. The hero, a Russian Jew who had already lost an arm during the Russo-Japanese War, apparently died saying, "Never mind, it is good to die for our Land." Influenced by the enthusiasm of the young country, stimulated by tales of heroism emerging from the wars and border skirmishes fought all around at that time, the teenager developed only one ambition—to be "a hero", when his time arrives. In order to prime himself, each night he ran miles around the neighborhood on the slopes of the Carmel and climbed up and down the *wadis* that disfigure the Carmel mountain on their way into the sea. When he was eighteen years old he joined the *Golani* Infantry Brigade.

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With mother (1959)

With father, sister and mother at his Bar Mitzvah reception (1963).



In Kibbutz Sarid (summer, 1962); High school (1967)