

1

The Early Years

They came to this country as adults; and they came in quest of greater opportunity and freedom. They brought with them little of material possessions, but they brought other things instead, things of great worth and enduring value: above all else, a devotion to Judaism; a love of learning, a yearning for freedom.

[From notes for a speech, "The Weidman Centenary," 1982]

In the years of my childhood three things signalled the existence of an emergency. One was the taking of a taxi rather than a streetcar, the second was the sending of a telegram instead of a letter, and the third was making a long-distance telephone call. The resort to a taxi, the more expensive means of conveyance, was a rare occasion; so rare indeed that it was confined to situations of special gravity, where speed was of utmost importance. So too only a matter of utmost urgency would warrant the use of the telegram, the costlier mode of communication: announcing a death, a birth, an engagement to marry, or the like. And the use of the long-distance telephone call automatically conveyed a message that something serious or important had occurred.

Plainly these choices operated in an atmosphere of economic deprivation. I grew up under the spur of honourable poverty. We were in truth a poor family, with little in the way of material endowments. But in the North End of Winnipeg, where we lived and worked, and where I spent my youth, no one else had much more. Our poverty, though limiting in its effects, was endurable simply because it was a burden borne more or less equally by all of us in the neighbourhood. Indeed, in later years the area where we lived, around Stella Avenue and Aikins Street, became the subject of "old-end redevelopment," which was the polite way of saying slum clearance. So you could say that in those early years of the century we lived in a small slum area. Not that as children we were conscious of the fact. Children don't think of those things.

People in general, and officialdom in particular, seem to have an obsessive and unholy concern about the place of one's birth. Practically the first question an immigration officer will put to anyone arriving at a Canadian border is, "Where were you born?" I have had to answer that question dozens of times, always with a sense of embarrassment, and always with a hurried addendum that I remember nothing about the old country and am strictly a Canadian. Because I was born in Russia, on April 16, 1908, and because my family left there in 1911 to come to Canada, my memories are all Canadian. For that I am thankful. I have to take my Russian origin on information and belief. I know I lived in Russia for three and a half years because my mother told me so.

This peculiar but intense preoccupation with my birthplace can spring up in the most ordinary social communications. One time, for instance, I was a participant in a symposium sponsored by the Great-West Life Assurance Company. My role was a relatively modest one. I was the moderator of one of the panel discussions. Those taking part in all the panels were persons of distinction, whose reputations in their fields were national in character and in some cases even beyond that.

One of the distinguished visitors was Sir Roger Bannister, known around the world as the first person to break the four-minute mile. I was introduced to him as Chief Justice Freedman, the Chief Justice of Manitoba. With the utmost cordiality, Sir Roger engaged me in conversation. "Have you lived in Winnipeg all your life?" I saw at once what was coming. "No," I replied, "I was about three and a half years old when our family came to this country." Sir Roger's next question was the inevitable one. "Where were you born?" I answered, "In Russia." Our conversation continued for several minutes. Sir Roger was all charm and enchantment. Not every day did he meet a Chief Justice born in Russia.

The following day my wife Brownie found herself seated next to Sir Roger at a luncheon arranged in connection with the symposium. When she was introduced to Sir Roger, his instant comment was, "Your husband was born in Russia. I had the pleasure of meeting him yesterday."

My father, Nathan, and my mother, Ada—her family name was Foxman—left the old world and came to the new in the pursuit of liberty. They both came from a small town near Zhitomir in the Ukraine. They were married in Zhitomir in February 1898—the exact date is uncertain, because they always celebrated the anniversary according to the Jewish calendar, resulting in fluctuations from year to year. Life for the Jews of

Russia—as it was for the Jews of much of the rest of continental Europe—was tense, precarious, and marked by fear. The word “pogrom” was seared into the soul and flesh of my parents and the other immigrant Jews who were their contemporaries. Their European existence was lived under the constant fear that they might be victims of a pogrom—that is to say, of an organized attack on Jews (men, women, and children), of homes and synagogues burnt, of possessions looted. All this, while officialdom in Russia conveniently looked the other way.

Jewish emigration from Europe bears a direct relationship to the occurrence of pogroms. Thus the exodus from Europe in 1882, in what for that time were large numbers, was a response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1881.¹ And the immigration to Canada in the first decade or so of this century followed upon the recurring series of pogroms of varying intensity. My wife’s family (the Weidmans) was part of the 1882 group. My own family was part of a later group. But the pattern was the same: pogroms this year, emigration of Jews the next.

That our family should not live in Russia for the whole of our lives was a basic premise claiming our allegiance. Just when we could make the break would depend on circumstances. But the lure of the New World gripped us in increasing measure. Already in 1909, an uncle—my father’s brother—had made the change along with his family. He chose Canada, and more specifically Winnipeg, because a brother-in-law of his had, a year or two earlier, made the big move and settled there. The pattern was becoming more and more familiar. One chose his destination according to established links. Thus it was that when my father’s turn came, he chose Winnipeg, as his brother had done before him. He had to make it to the

¹ The infamous Kishinev pogrom, noted for its severity and cruelty, took place in 1903, though it is possible that a less prominent pogrom had taken place in 1881. Intensified repression and violence against Jews had begun in spring 1881 following the assassination of Alexander II, for which Jews were blamed. That April, a series of “vicious pogroms” had taken place across Southern Russia, in Elisavetgrad, Kiev, Bialystok, Kharkov, Odessa, and many other smaller towns. The Russian government not only encouraged, perhaps even instigated, the violence, but also brought in new legal measures restricting Jewish movement and activities. In Harry Gutkin, *Journey into Our Heritage: The Story of the Jewish People in the Canadian West* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1980) at 26, the author writes: “In the thirty-three years between the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 and the outbreak of World War I, one-third of east European Jews left behind their homelands.”

New World on his own, and he didn't travel overseas first class, but steerage.

In those days a family's move to the New World often came about in two shifts. The first would bring the father here. The second—following a year or two later—would bring the mother and children. The length of the interval between the two events would depend on the father's ability to establish himself to the point at which he could qualify for a bank loan large enough to finance the adventure. One Winnipeg banker, Mr. W.F. Alloway, was especially helpful in this regard. Mr. Alloway, of the banking firm of Alloway and Champion, later became well-known as the founder of the Winnipeg Foundation, an institution that supports a large number of organizations—charitable, recreational, educational. But before that he had become known and revered by the local Jewish community for being the banker of the Jews. With a fine sensitivity for the problems confronting these immigrant Jews, Mr. Alloway bent over backwards to help them, often by granting extensions of time for payment of the instalments.

About a year and a half after my father's arrival in Winnipeg he arranged, with Mr. Alloway's help, for my mother and her children to come. By that time the family had five children—Charles, Lillian, Harry, Fred, and me, the youngest. The trip, from beginning to end, took almost six weeks—including more than two weeks for the ocean crossing itself. Although I have no personal recollections of it, I did hear my mother tell the story of it on numerous occasions. My mother, let the truth be told, needed only a minimum of encouragement to plunge into a recital of the voyage in all its detail. She stage-managed her performances in professional style. She seated her listeners in such a way that each would be able to hear her, and see her too. She spoke for about fifty minutes, the length of a professor's lecture to his students. She was always a great hit. Years later, when widowed and alone, she became a resident of the Sharon Home, a facility with nursing care and, no less important, a kosher kitchen. Within a few days of her arrival she began to "hold court." Her neighbour ladies came to extend a greeting of welcome, but remained to be part of Mrs. Freedman's audience. Included in her repertoire, we may be sure, was the story of her voyage from the old country to Winnipeg.

She would say it was an eventful journey and that on the ship she kept herself busy sewing for the five children. One part concerned the last leg

of the trip, the train ride from Halifax to Winnipeg.² The many immigrant families just off the ship, like the Freedmans, gathered at the railway station to take the train to Winnipeg or other places, and they were understandably concerned about communicating with their husbands, or other relatives, letting them know where they were and about when they would arrive. They didn't know English and had no idea of how to go about sending a message in this strange place. However, one enterprising man from the Halifax area had directed his mind to this very problem. He gathered the immigrants together and kindly told them that he would do them the service of sending a telegram, giving details of the expected arrival, to the person who was waiting for them. He would do this, he said, in return for a payment of five dollars from each family. Nearly all of them took up his offer, the Freedmans included, but not a single telegram was received at the other end. The friendly man turned out to be a con artist.

The result for the immigrants was worry, mental anguish, and much shedding of tears. Some of the members of our group fared better than we did. Those who were to receive them had telephones. Our father did not have a telephone, so that slowed down communications between us. If telephone communication had been available, we could have found out, relatively quickly, if Father had received a telegram dealing with our arrival. As matters stood, we remained in the dark on that question. As we approached the Winnipeg station after the long, tiring trip, we could only speculate that father might have received the telegram and at that very

² Although the story here, as told in Freedman's autobiographical manuscript, indicates that the family arrived in Halifax and travelled to Winnipeg from there, a letter of March 3, 1942, written by Sam Freedman to provide information for insurance policies, gives the port of debarkation as "Portland" and notes, "I have been unable to find out in what province or state this would be. It may have been Portland, Maine, as my parents told me that from Portland we travelled to Chicago, then to St. Paul, then to Winnipeg."

The letter lists the port of embarkation as "Libau, Russia," with the family's arrival in Portland given as December 27, 1911, on the ship "Canada," and arrival in Winnipeg as "about January 3, 1912." The members of the family, in addition to Sam himself, were listed as "Mother, Ada Chasen, Brother, Charles Chasen, Sister, Lillian Chasen, Brother, Harry Chasen, and Brother, Fred Chasen." The letter notes, "Correct spelling of name at that time - Chasen, changed to Freedman on arrival in Winnipeg." Letter from Sam Freedman to The London Life Insurance Company, Winnipeg (3 March 1942), Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (box 65, file no 3).

moment be setting out for the railway station to gather us in. We would all feel very foolish if “like ships that pass in the night,” we passed each other by. So once in the station we remained waiting for something to happen.

My brother Harry took me for a walk around the station. We were wearing our Russian clothes, and two Jewish cattle buyers who had just come in from a western point began to talk to us in Yiddish. Harry responded in that language, telling them that our mother was waiting, resting in another part of the station. The men immediately asked us to take them to her. When they saw her, one of them called out her name, “Ada.” Seeing her still puzzled, he added, “It’s Menachem.” He had lived in their village, and the families had been good friends. There was great joy at this fortunate meeting, and things began to move with greater speed under Menachem’s direction. Within a short time we were reunited with our father.

So our long journey was over. A new chapter was about to begin. What it might contain we did not know. But we entered into it with hope and optimism.

In Canada my father, Nathan, became a junk pedlar with a horse and wagon, and that’s what he did until he retired at age seventy. He had been a cattle buyer in Russia, but when he came to Canada he didn’t know the language, and he never went to school here. He was in a sense the prisoner of the old country traditions that the immigrants brought with them: the ideals, yes, but also the handicaps.

I was the fifth of eight children, although one of us, Chassia, lived only for about six months. My childhood memories centre around the North End’s Stella Avenue and Aikins Street. We lived on Redwood Avenue until I was about eight years old, then moved to Stella Avenue, and then, when I was in Grade 5 or 6, we went to 105 Aikins Street, staying there until I was in Grade 11. We lived in one small, rented house after another—you would think we lived on wheels.

The intersection of Stella and Aikins provided me with both a meeting place and a playing field. There I would join my school friends—all boys, no girls—either to talk away the hours or to engage in some form of sport. A favourite form of winter sport was hockey—not the real thing, but our own adaptation of the game. This was hockey without skates,

without regular hockey sticks but with improvised substitutes, and even without a real puck. We came up with an acceptable alternative for a puck: a lump of frozen manure. In that district there were few automobiles, but many horses, so our supply of manure pucks was reasonably well ensured. In the course of a game one puck would be subjected to a steady battering until it ceased to be serviceable. A replacement for it would be readily found, thanks to the horses of our neighbourhood. One could truly say that in our version of hockey a puck in the face constituted a double hazard.

Not until I was fifteen and in Grade 11 did we live in a house that contained what was described as “full plumbing.” Before that we had a toilet in the basement and a wash basin in the kitchen, but not a bathtub or a shower. Our baths were taken in the kitchen, in a big washtub. The cold water would go in first, followed by a kettle or two of hot water, followed then by me, after first carefully testing it, or, on some occasions, by my younger brother Max and me. Because the taking of a bath in the Freedman household was clearly a major production, some appropriate doubling-up was invoked to ease the situation, and with seven children it could by no means be a daily exercise. We were allotted different days. I am sure that my present love for a bath or a shower is a reflection of my profound distaste for the washtub, which for the first fifteen years of my life had to serve as an inadequate and unwelcome substitute for the real thing.

My father and mother were married for sixty-five years. They had a very happy marriage. It may not have been graced with an abundance of material possessions, but it contained the basic elements that counted—understanding, mutual respect, mutual love. These they had in large measure.

Both of my parents were highly intelligent people—I marvel now at their good taste. I remember we had a gramophone which you had to wind up, and if you forgot, the voice would suddenly start to turn from a tenor to a bass. They had cantorial music, but the best of it: Rosenblat, Kwartin, Hershman, and a number of others. And then there were the classics of the day: “The Volga Boatman,” with Boris Chaliapin, Enrico Caruso singing his famous arias from *Aida* and *Pagliacci*, and there must have been

a John McCormack. Chaliapin and Caruso and McCormack were to be found in many Jewish homes at that time, as these people of my parents' generation reached out for the finest in art, as they understood it.

Fidelity was taken for granted. My mother, more of an extrovert than my father, always shone out first. It was only in later years that I came to have a better appreciation of my father's qualities, especially his fine education in Yiddish and Hebrew. His favourite hangout was the synagogue, where he and his cronies would discuss all manner of issues, *mitten grobben finger*, in great depth.

The other element that pervaded our family lives was a sense of humour, which both my parents had and appreciated. I remember one time my parents went out for a walk. After a while they came back into the house laughing. We said (as the conversation was all in Yiddish—it loses a bit in translation), "What is it?" Mother said, "Your father made a witty remark." We said, "Let's hear."

We were told they had been walking down the street when suddenly my father spied a dime on the ground, and stooped to pick it up. Not content with his good fortune, he began to gloat about his discovery. He said to my mother, "We're both walking but I find the ten cents and you don't." My mother said, "You find the ten cents because I walk with my head in the air and you walk with your head in the earth." My father said, "You walk with your head in the air because you've got me, and I walk with my head buried in the ground because I've got you."

Another time my mother was going to a Mizrahi meeting.³ She had her coat on. There was a knock on the door. A neighbour lady came in and said, "If you're going to the Mizrahi meeting then, Mrs. Freedman, I will go with you." My mother said, "Fine." The lady said, "But Mrs. Freedman, you know you are going to have to make a speech there." This led to consternation on my mother's part. She asked, "What kind of a speech can I give them?" My father said, "Give them the speech that you give me."

³ The Mizrahi Organization, founded in 1912, was a Zionist body of Orthodox Jews that, in its Winnipeg branch, raised funds for religious schools and institutions in Palestine and supported the efforts of the Jewish National Fund, a worldwide campaign to collect money to purchase land in Israel for Jewish settlement. Arthur A. Chiel, *The Jews in Manitoba: A Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961) at 159, 167.

No one loves freedom as much as the person who has had it and lost it, or who has never had it at all. My parents and the other Jewish immigrants of their time found in this new land, in America, a breadth of freedom greater than anything they could have imagined. The sense of freedom was established slowly but grew with the evolution of time. In Russia, Jews could never regard the policeman in uniform as a friend or a protector. In Canada, his counterpart, though at first viewed with suspicion, gradually won their confidence as their policeman, one who could be trusted to protect the interests and safety of all people, Jews as well as non-Jews. The uniform, a symbol of power and authority, represented something far better in Canada than it ever did in the lands from which they had departed.

The power of a uniform became the theme of a story told again and again in my family. In or about the year 1920, the lieutenant-governor of Manitoba, Sir James Aikins,⁴ was invited to deliver an address to the Jewish community of Winnipeg. Although my father's and mother's knowledge of English was still exceedingly limited, they were determined to be present at this event, and so on the evening in question they went, along with hundreds of other Jews, to the Talmud Torah Hall, in the very heart of Jewry's North End. Most of the people who filled the hall had, like my parents, only a rudimentary knowledge of English, and their attendance was little more than an act of courtesy towards the distinguished guest who, they felt, was honouring the Jewish people of Winnipeg.

When my parents returned home later that evening, still in the afterglow of a thrilling experience, the children gathered around and asked, "How was the lieutenant-governor?" Mother and father agreed that the evening had been one of the greatest times they had ever enjoyed, though one of them added that the lieutenant-governor himself did not speak—another gentleman had made the speech of the evening and he was simply wonderful. They would never forget the event, my parents said.

In the next day or so we heard other accounts of the evening, and we learned that the lieutenant-governor had been accompanied by his military aide-de-camp, resplendent in his military dress. The lieutenant-governor had worn a dark business suit. To my parents, and to several hundred others like them, the man in the uniform was assuredly the lieutenant-

⁴ Sir James Albert Manning Aikins (1851-1929), a lawyer and politician, was lieutenant-governor of Manitoba 1916-26.

governor. That he permitted “another gentleman” to make the speech was simply an example of his great-heartedness. Such was the power of a uniform. Not without some difficulty were we able to persuade our parents that they had not only seen the lieutenant-governor but had also heard him speak.

Yiddish was the language of communication in our home, at least in our earlier days. My father and mother always spoke to each other in that language, and for a short time the children too spoke to each other in Yiddish. My brother Max once remarked, “If I could speak with half the skill and wit in English with which my mother speaks in Yiddish—I would give my right arm.”⁵ Inevitably and quickly, as we children absorbed the influences of our environment, we more and more resorted to English. Two parallel forces operated to make the victory of English a certain one. First, day in and day out, we were exposed to that language. What we used in school and on the street could not easily be doffed or discarded as we touched the front steps of our home. The other force was the gradual acquisition by our parents of a knowledge of the English language. This did not come easily or quickly to them, but a day arrived when our use of English in conversation evoked comprehension from them, and thereafter our communications in that language improved year by year.

We didn’t attend a parochial school, but had the next best thing, a Hebrew teacher who came to the house. I think his name was Mintz. He came about three times a week, which we thought was too often. We tried to hide from him, but he always found us. He tried to teach us the Hebrew prayers and a little bit of Hebrew writing, but we were more interested in soccer, football, and baseball, and we resisted this intrusion on our more urgent activities. I did not have a formal bar mitzvah and neither did my brothers Charlie, Harry, Fred, or Max, because a bar mitzvah, even on the most modest scale, required a party, a *kiddush* complete with wine. It was something we couldn’t undertake financially for each son, and so we didn’t have it at all. I became thirteen years of age by fluxion of time. That’s the usual way one achieves it, and I was usual.

⁵ See “An Eloquent Jurist”, Editorial, *The Brandon Sun* (9 March 1957), Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (box 101, file no 17). The editorial adds: “In that [Freedman] household books were second in importance to bread. There is a legend among the staff of St. John’s branch of the Winnipeg Public Library that the Freedman children read the shelves clean.”

My older sister, Lil, went out to work fairly early after grade nine, so her Jewish education was minimal. My younger sister, Caroline, had a good Yiddish education, but that was because she did it largely on her own, encouraged by the family of Rabbi Herson, a next-door neighbour. My brother Fred had the same instruction I had in Hebrew, but was more interested in it. He later lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, and before he died in 1980, he was at a stage where he could *daven* well and lead the congregation from the pulpit. I admired him for it. I spoke Yiddish, but never learned to master Hebrew. I go to Israel often, and the fortunate thing is that most Israelis speak English.

What was happening in the Freedman household was duplicated in many a Jewish home. Indeed, so similar and so widespread were the reactions to the language problem that a genuine fear arose that Yiddish might not be able to survive the threat which the situation posed. This fear was by no means groundless. Indeed it is encountered whenever a minority culture confronts the culture of the majority group, particularly when the latter welcomes the minority's approach as part of an assimilative process.

Ours was an Orthodox home, and that it did not produce strong Orthodox offspring is something for which I cannot blame our parents. When we entered the university, we were taught to look at facts and to question. It became very hard to give an unqualified acceptance to Orthodox Jewish customs when the rationale for it didn't satisfy us.

Many years later, when I was a student at the University of Manitoba, I was active in the work of the Menorah Society, an organization for the Jewish students of the university. Among its activities was the sponsoring of debates and discussions. One of the recurring themes for discussion was the question: what is it that has kept the Jewish people alive through the ages? The answer then given—and the same answer would be applicable today—was twofold: pressure from without, and cohesion within. Pressure from without referred to anti-Semitism; and just as in physics pressure solidifies, so pressure in the form of anti-Semitism solidified and strengthened the Jewish group and helped to keep it alive.

That external pressure was a factor contributing to Jewish survival cannot be denied, but the internal cohesive factors were given less credit than they deserved. These factors included language, culture, a way of life in which Jewish humour and Jewish cooking played a significant role, and the movement towards a Jewish national home, a movement which, since

1948, was transformed into a devotion to the cause of Israel. The emergence of the state of Israel has added a new feature to the internal cohesive factors.

The free society in which we live today is largely, though not entirely, unmarred by the racial prejudices and discriminations that characterized the external pressures of an earlier day. In its wake a different problem emerged: can Judaism survive the challenge of freedom?

I am a product, then, of Winnipeg's North End, and according to the considerable literature that has emerged from and on that area, to be one of its alumnus or alumna is to possess a badge of distinction. Such a person is entitled to look upon himself as a graduate of the school of hard knocks, a school whose colours are black and blue. Toughened and disciplined in that environment, the graduate emerges into the wider world ready to meet and overcome its many challenges. Nothing that he will encounter in the outside world will be as hard as what came before. Our graduate of the North End will possess a special kind of drive. Fiercely competitive as he was in the North End, he will emerge into the larger forum with a willingness, indeed a determination, to go the extra mile. He will be acutely aware that to meet the broader competition now facing him, he must put forward not merely one hundred per cent of effort, but at least one hundred and ten per cent. Avis tries harder, because it is in second place rather than in the lead. Long before Avis had acquired and publicized its slogan, the graduates of Winnipeg's North End were already putting that slogan into daily practice.

My school education began at Strathcona School in 1913. I was then five years of age. There was no kindergarten available at that time, and I was permitted to enrol at school before the usual age of six years. I recall little of that first school except the embarrassment of having to collect my older brothers' books at the end of every day, just as the class was saying the Lord's Prayer, so that Charlie and Harry could rush off to sell their newspapers on the street. Two years later I entered Aberdeen School, which supplied me with more vivid memories.

The student enrolment at Aberdeen School reflected the ethnic mix of the neighbourhood around it. The Jewish group predominated. When the High Holidays came and the Jewish students were absent, what remained

was so thin that it hardly merited the usual form of teaching. A hold-the-line attitude was adopted until the holiday was over and the Jewish majority were back in their seats. Smaller groups included Ukrainians, Germans, and Poles, among others. Anglo-Saxons were also there, but in small numbers.

One day in our classroom an encounter of considerable interest occurred between a girl and our teacher. A big factor in this incident was that the student, V., was of English background, and not a "foreigner". Early in the morning the teacher, Mrs. B., slapped V. hard in the face, causing her to burst into tears. When the afternoon session began, V. was not present, but a few minutes later came a knock on the classroom door. Mrs. B. answered, and from my seat I caught sight of V. and a woman, V.'s mother no doubt. Mrs. B. stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind her.

A spirited and angry dialogue ensued. V.'s English mother, it appeared, was giving as well as she received. Clearly she could respond to our teacher in a way that the mothers of the Jewish classmates would have been unable to do. After a short while Mrs. B. opened the door and the three participants entered the room. Mrs. B. asked, "Class, did I slap V. in the face this morning?" With one voice, the entire class, including me, said, "No."

Mrs. B. had taken a gamble and won. But for her it may not have been such a gamble. She had a keen appreciation of the awe or fear with which these young children looked upon their teacher, and sensed that they would respond to her question exactly as they did. Not without shame do I recall my participation in that sordid episode. If I had my life to live over again, I would have said—as I should have said at the crucial moment—"Yes, you know very well you did slap V. in the face this morning." But injustice won the day.

There was, to be sure, some rivalry and fighting amongst the different ethnic groups in the city. In the pre-1920s and early 1920s, Aberdeen School played sports against Machray School, Strathcona School, and King Edward School, which were largely non-Jewish. We always ended up in fights, and usually we lost. The non-Jews were tougher, it seemed. We did have some protection from a young man named Jack Levick, known as Jack Prizefighter. He was a tough guy. When he came along to an event, no one would start with him—there would be no fights, and that was an off-the-field victory for the Jews.

We knew that on the other side of town there was a richer area, the Wellington Crescent area, the South End. For one thing, our school team would play in the city finals against the South End team and we would trek to their school. In those days we made the long walk across the Salter Street Bridge over the CPR tracks—we very rarely spent a nickel for a streetcar. But the walk didn't hurt us in the long run. I think it taught us the value of a dollar, and that continued when we went to the university. Plenty of times I walked over that bridge coming home from some event. I might get a nickel for the streetcar to go up there, because I had to get there at a certain time. Coming home, with a bit of leeway and without the nickel, I walked on the bridge, in the middle, unprotected, gales of wind blowing, me with my cap and the earflaps down, the frail figure battling against the storm. But we did it and we did it and we did it.

Another incident of my school days has more pleasant resonance. I was thirteen and in grade eight. In our history class we were approaching the subject of Confederation. Our history teacher was a Mrs. Wallace, a gifted, imaginative, and inspired teacher. She taught us to be interested in historical personages. She conceived the idea of a re-enactment of the Confederation story, with students in the class playing the roles of the various Fathers of Confederation. I was assigned the role of George Brown. A friend of mine, Michael Syme, was Sir John A. Macdonald, and another friend, Max Wolinsky, was Étienne-Paschal Taché. In all about a dozen students were selected for the project. Mrs. Wallace went to the original speeches made at the conferences that had led to Confederation (Charlottetown, Quebec, and London, 1864 to 1867), edited them, reducing them to their basic essentials so that the roles of the young students would not be too heavy or unmanageable. She then fixed a day for the presentation of the historic drama before the rest of the class.

When curtain time came, the students, well-rehearsed by Mrs. Wallace, gave a stirring performance. Soon other teachers and other students asked to see the show. So another date was fixed, on a Friday afternoon, this time in the school assembly hall for the entire student body and teaching staff. Another success was recorded. Very quickly a new demand followed. Now the parents wanted to see the performance. The North End Y.M.C.A. at Selkirk Avenue and Powers Street was accordingly booked for a Saturday evening. That event drew a full house, to the delight of everyone concerned with the project. Here was history brought to life through an inspiring teacher who tried to make the Confederation

story vivid and meaningful for us. There weren't many Mrs. Wallaces in the school system, and I cherish the memory of the one we were fortunate to have at Aberdeen School.

I entered Grade 10 at St. John's High School in June 1922. When I graduated two years later I had the honour of being class valedictorian at the graduation exercises. The school was well over a mile away from our home. We walked all the way, summer and winter, and usually back and forth at the noon hour too. Sometimes on special occasions we might take a sandwich with us, and if we had a nickel we would buy a sugar-coated jelly buster, but that was a rare treat to be savoured. My two years at St. John's were exceedingly happy ones in nearly every respect. I even liked the machine shops people, although I was no good at that work. I remember a Mr. Johns who took part in the 1919 General Strike. St. John's also had a wonderful English teacher named Miss Ada Turner, perhaps the best teacher I ever had. She was exceedingly well-equipped with the knowledge of English literature, poetry and prose, and did her best to pass it on to us. In some cases she found resistance, because we had our mistakes and our fools, but we had some good students.

About forty years after I graduated from St. John's High School, I went back to talk to the students there, and they asked me what I would do differently if I were a student again. I told them, "I would spend more time on athletics. In my day, three times around the cinder track was half a mile. You needed no stop watch to time me—a calendar would have done quite nicely."

A qualification to my exuberant assessment of the school arises from my limited and not very happy social life. I was an awkward kid, ill at ease in the presence of girls, so I did not seek their company, fool that I was. But this was the fault not of the school, but of myself.

One of the things I remember well was an oratorical contest sponsored by the school. It proved to be a resounding success. Its origin lay in the desire to provide some useful project for the large number of students who took their lunches with them to school, gobbled them up in about ten minutes, and then for the next hour or more wandered around, looking for something to do. Someone came up with the idea of an oratorical contest. The idea met with instant approval, and a committee was chosen to settle the details of the plan.

It was decided to hold a series of noon-hour events in an elimination contest. The winners in those events would be entitled to participate in

the final contest, which would be held in the evening and be open to the entire student body, the teaching staff, the parents and relatives of the students, and as many others as could be accommodated in the school auditorium. A panel of St. John's teachers would act as judges, and a qualified person would be sought to act as critic and commentator—a move that carried with it the seeds of danger. Three medals—gold, silver, and bronze—would be awarded to the frontrunners.

As it ended up, I was one of eight students who found themselves competing for the final honours in the oratorical contest. Seven teachers constituted the panel of judges. Professor W.F. Osborne, a distinguished public speaker, was the critic and commentator. When we drew numbers to determine our speaking sequence, my lot was to be number eight, the last in line.

The topic I had chosen was "Utopia and the Jew." My theme was that we would never build a utopia until we freed ourselves from the incubus of anti-Semitism and other forms of racial and religious prejudice and discrimination. It seemed to me that the speech was well received. After all the contestants had finished, the chairman requested the judges to retire for the purpose of arriving at their decision, and he then introduced Professor Osborne, inviting him to the platform to perform his function as critic and commentator. As Professor Osborne was walking up, a friend of mine whispered to me, "I was watching him. He just couldn't stop applauding your speech." My hopes were up, to say the least.

Professor Osborne was in splendid form. He spoke with vigour, wit, and enthusiasm. He was particularly impressed, he said, with the idealism manifest in each contestant's treatment of his topic. He had words of praise for each of the participants, accompanied now and then by a suggestion, tactfully expressed, on how the product might still be improved. When he came to the eighth effort he paused for a few seconds, then said, "And finally that last brilliant and breathless thing, Utopia and the Jew." But at that point he stopped short, because the judges were returning to the auditorium and the school principal, Mr. G.J. Reeve, quickly took over to announce their decision. The gold medal went to Alfred Berman, who had spoken on the topic "Armenia the Martyr". I won the silver medal.

Looking back at the event across a span of nearly seven decades, I recall my reaction as one of disappointment but not of bitterness. When Alfred Berman was delivering his speech, I sensed that he would be the

man to beat. The speech was lucid and instructive, and well delivered. He was a worthy winner. And a silver medal should not be looked upon with contempt. For myself the silver medal represented a mark of distinction then, and it still represents that today.

St. John's Tech produced a large number of distinguished graduates. When the 75th anniversary of the school was celebrated, one feature was the singing of operatic arias by three members of the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York, all graduates of St. John's High School. I wonder how many high schools on this continent could match such an achievement. But the alumni of the school also excelled in the academic world, in the world of sports, in the domain of television, and in the learned professions, including the sciences. They laboured hard and well, and their efforts were often crowned with glory. There is a quality of uniqueness in the signal accomplishments of this high school, set in the heart of a Western Canadian prairie, nearly five hundred miles from the nearest sizeable city, yet virtually on its own doing great things and moving always to the "next milestone, and beyond."

