

The Life Story of an Undistinguished Jewish American  
A Family History between Two Melting Pots

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This paper highlights issues of the American “melting pot” as reflected in real life experiences. Fashioned after “The Life stories of Undistinguished Americans” (edited in 1906 by Hamilton Holt), I relate the life story of my mother, who came to America as a child of Jewish immigrants, as well as my own experience. This account of immigration differs from the ordinary in that it involves going back and forth to and from America.

My mother absorbed and synthesized American values with her Jewish heritage. My sense is that it made her a better human being, Jewish and American. This is a realization of Randolph Bourne’s understanding of the “melting pot” concept. In his 1916 essay “Trans-National America” Bourne, who presents himself as Anglo-Saxon, argues against the elitist WASP idea of “melting pot” which calls for immigrants to shed their old identities and adopt the Anglo Saxon ways. Instead, he is for letting American culture evolve in a democratic way, retaining the good in “alien cultures” brought by immigrants:

I speak as an Anglo-Saxon. The foreign cultures have not been melted down or run together, made into some homogeneous Americanism, but have remained distinct but cooperating to the greater glory and benefit not only of themselves but of all the native ‘Americanism’ around them. (Bourne, I, 98)

Indeed, both my mother and I were enriched by, and contributed to people of different legacies with whom we came in contact. Furthermore, my mother and I retained both our American and Israeli citizenships. Using French citizenship as an example, Bourne favors dual citizenship as a step towards an ideal evolvement of America into a cosmopolitan, trans-national culture. He contrasts this with the crude nationalism that devastated Europe of the World War I period. Bourne sees a positive influence in the movement of immigrants back and forth between America and their homelands:

a nation like France is said to permit a formal and legal dual citizenship [...] And such a dual citizenship seems to us sound and right. For it recognizes that, although the Frenchman may accept the formal institutional framework of his new country and indeed become intensely loyal to it, yet his Frenchness he will never lose. [...] so that unless he becomes utterly degenerate he will always to some degree dwell still in his native environment. [...] this expansion involves no shameful conflict within him, no surrender of his native attitude. [...] He sees the new peoples here with a new vision. They are no longer masses of aliens, waiting to be 'assimilated,' waiting to be melted down into the indistinguishable dough of Anglo-Saxonism. They are rather [...] striving to weave themselves into a novel international nation, the first the world has seen (III, 105).

I like to think the life experiences I tell here provide examples of these values advanced by Randolph Bourne.

My mother grew up in New London, Connecticut, where her father was Rabbi of the orthodox Jewish congregation, named "Ahavath Chesed" (love of charity). She was six years old when they moved, her parents and older sister, to New London from Jerusalem. The family had lived in Jerusalem for seven generations since 1808, when disciples of Vilna Gaon came from Lithuania and established the first neighborhoods outside the Jewish quarter in the Old City.

Their New London congregation was founded in 1892 as the "Sick Benefit Society of Ahavath Chesed" by orthodox Jews from Lithuania. Regular services were established then, and in 1905 the synagogue was built downtown (and moved to a newer location in the 1960s). Historically, the official Christian charter of Connecticut colonial government

restricted Jewish and Catholic settlement in Connecticut. (*jewishvirtuallibrary.org*). In 1843 the Statutes were amended: "Jews who may desire to unite and form religious societies may have the same rights, powers, and privileges as are given to Christians of every denomination by the laws of the State" (*ibid*). Around that year, or a little earlier, the first Jewish congregations in Connecticut were formed in Hartford and New Haven. (*ibid*).

The 1930 *American Jewish Year Book*, cites statistics of the Jewish population in New London which numbered 1,600, 5.5% of the general population of 27,800.

My mother went to a public school in New London in the 1930s and received an excellent education there. She loved school. "The teachers were so fair!" she said at an old age, reminiscing the best years of her life. Her classmates had kind words to write in the yearbook about the sweet girl "with the strange name", Zipporah.

When I checked a few years ago, the school building housed a television studio. I suppose nowadays most schools that offer a comparable quality education are private. In her high school years, her family moved from New London to New York, seeking private Jewish education for her. They lived in Brooklyn and Zipporah went to Ramaz Yeshiva high school and teachers seminar, in Manhattan.

In her twenties she came back to Israel with her parents. Her sister, already married, stayed and raised a family in New York. Zipporah met my father in Tel Aviv, where they settled and lived all the rest of their long life. Shortly after the marriage, her parents went back to America where her father became a Rabbi in Boston.

When my older sister and I were growing up in Tel Aviv we loved singing American songs with our mother and listening to her chats in English with American friends. Regrettably, we did not speak English with her and we learned it at school as a foreign language. We and our mother were not aware that American law permitted her to

register us as American born citizens at the American Consulate in Tel Aviv. When we learned it later, mother did so for our benefit.

I first came to America in the 1980s. On the first day and first subway ride from Manhattan to Brooklyn I was saying to myself: “This must be some sort of a strange mistake. These people here cannot be Americans”. Grace Kelly and Gregory Peck were found nowhere on the D train and it felt awkward. Curiously, years later on a job assignment in a Midwest suburb of Chicago, I felt awkward being surrounded by a homogeneous all white society.

After some travelling, I first settled in Washington, DC, and worked in one of its Northern Virginia suburbs. Lincoln’s birthday was not celebrated in that area, which had a mild Southern feel. Among my colleagues, educated software engineers and other professionals, there were some who expressed resentment of the Martin Luther King day that was beginning to be observed in the country then. One couple talked about moving to Colorado to get away from such a disturbing trend. But, my manager J. T., a New Englander, was the nicest man you ever saw. He treated with natural, genuine grace everyone in the staff, which included men and women of Chinese, Vietnamese, African, and other descents. He reminded me of my mother’s fondness of her New London teachers who “were so fair!”

My other manager, T. W., was a retired army officer who grew up in North Dakota. His first encounter with black and Jewish people occurred when he went to the army. I was embarrassed to hear people say of him that he regarded me as Godly, out of respect to my faithful observance of the Sabbath and eating only Kosher (or vegetarian, in most circumstances). On Fridays I would leave unfinished work and hurry home for the Sabbath. Then I would come Sunday to finish the job. There was no need to clock my work hours.

Once, before Passover, having exhausted my vacation time, I told J. T. that I fancied going for four days to spend the holiday with my parents in Tel Aviv. “Go” said he, “Don’t worry about the vacation time, it’s on me.”

One of my assignments with the same company was heading a small team of computer software professionals to aid in the operations of an Election Office of a county government. Around a two day Jewish holiday, in which I would be absent from work, I combined another two or three days of vacation time and went to see my family in Israel. I have developed a habit of keeping in close and frequent touch with them by visiting twice a year. The manager of the county Election Office was displeased with that. I left the work in the hands of a competent team and the elections were still a good number of months off, but he sent an angry letter to my managers reprimanding my trip to “my homeland”. My managers were furious at him and the language he used, which to them seemed insinuating. I assured them that I saw nothing wrong with his expression since, indeed, Israel has been my homeland. Still, my managers (the above mentioned J. T and T. W) said it was “un-American” of him. Later one Friday, unrelated to my trip, a mishap caused a malfunction in the voters registration database. Our team worked hard to try to mend it but it was out of the question that I would stay further with them into the Sabbath. Saturday night I called to find out they were still working on it and I hurried to the office. It so happened that mine was the winning stroke that salvaged the database. The relieved Election Office manager sent a magnanimous letter of commendation to my managers.

My experience in America has taught me that God is as worthy as the behavior of His or Her faithful. In a few visits to churches, I was moved by the worshipers’ devotion that I saw, when I saw it. I also enjoyed an occasional church dance event. The dancers certainly did better than those at the Conservative synagogue parties.

My Jewish mother is the farthest you could get from Philip Roth's, or rather, Portnoy's. In his 1974 article "How Did You Come To Write That Book, Anyway?" Philip Roth says the vulgar Jewish Portnoy family is not modeled after his, but after families written about by his students. The 1969 book describes a handicapped Jewish life severely lacking in values and civility. This is an illustration of Bourne's references to the "utterly degenerate" immigrants who may keep their communal or ethnic affiliation but replace their heritage with a low senseless way of life which they consider American:

"Our cities are filled with these half-breeds who retain their foreign names but have lost the foreign savor. This does not mean that they have actually been changed into New Englanders or Middle Westerners. It does not mean that they have been really Americanized. It means that, letting slip from them whatever native culture they had, they have substituted for it only the most rudimentary American —" (Bourne, I, 98).

The Portnoy's are immersed in an endless, stressful struggle to make a living, keep up a masterful housework, stay away from non Jews, and suffocate the son Alex with obsessive care and a drive to excellence. Alex, like his parents, had hardly any Jewish education. He grows to detest his family and their Jewish way. He expresses this with pain and a fair share of vulgarity and a certain type of humor:

I am sick and tired of *goyische* this and *goyische* that! If it's bad it's the *goyim*, if it's good it's the Jews! Can't you see, my dear parents, from whose loins I somehow leaped, that such thinking is a trifle barbaric? That all you are expressing is your fear? The very first distinction I learned from you. I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyische* and Jewish! But now it turns out, my dear parents, relatives, and assembled friends who have

gathered here to celebrate the occasion of my bar mitzvah, it turns out, you schmucks! you narrow-minded schmucks! — oh, how I hate you for your Jewish narrow-minded minds! (Roth, *Portnoy's*, 75-6).

Reading *Portnoy's Complaint*, and having met such boorish families, heightened my sense of gratitude for the refined, humble, generous mother (and educated father) I got. After her father passed away in Boston, her old ailing mother came to Tel Aviv to live with her and my father, in their two bedroom apartment. The neighbors loved seeing the sweet old grandmother standing on the open balcony watching the quiet affairs of the street. The devoted loving care she received from my mother was heart warming to all.

I too am back in Tel Aviv now. I may have lived more years in America than my mother. Her sister certainly did. Still, she was the youngest of her family to have come to America and received her first education there in a good public school. She loved English, Wordsworth and Shelley, was envied by her sister and me for the pleasant “Yankee” speech that she retained. She remains an enlightened American, ethical, charitable to all, a 1930s-American-Zionist-Orthodox-Jewish-girl.



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