Sidney Schuman's early days

I was born in the London Hospital, Hackney of Polish-Jewish parents on September 12th 1930, am or pm I don't know. No doubt, as was the fashion of the times, I was soon out of there, to my new home, a first-floor flat in the house at 229 Hackney Road. My parents called me Sidney Maurice, which is what they had called my stillborn brother 5 years before. The Hebrew form (transliterated) is Sendar Maier. My sister Muriel was two, and I believe she loved the new baby. My father's name was Jacob and my mother's name was Jane. They both came from fairly large families, so no doubt I was shown off to myriad aunts, uncles and cousins. This would have been on Sundays, the traditional visiting-day. Saturdays, the Sabbath, were not days of activity and travelling. Both my parents had come to the East End with their respective families some time between 1885 and 1890. I reckon my father was two or three years old at the time, my mother still a baby.

I never heard any talk of life in Poland, but I assume that the reason for their migration was the same as most other East European Jews at the time - the pogroms. In fact, there may have been such talk, but I never understood it, since it was in Yiddish. A great deal of my early life was spent in the company of relations who spoke to each other in Yiddish. Unfortunately, it was used as a way of communicating without letting the kids know, and it worked. A few years later, I remember mum and dad talking to each other in French. This must have been because we (or, at least, Muriel) had started to pick up some Yiddish.

Unfortunately, I was born with a shocking memory and I have only hearsay that I was a very good baby. I slept well, and was quite placid. I probably saw more of my dad than some children, because he was unemployed in the 1930s. Not that he helped with child-rearing, after all gender roles were pretty strong. (Perhaps even more so with an East European background.) So, like most babies, I loved my mummy, and she certainly loved me, as only a Jewish mother can. All the same, you can't live on love, so at the earliest possible time, mum got a part-time job. She was a cigarette-packer at the Carreras factory in Hampstead Road, near Camden Town station. So every day she took Muriel to Scawfell Street School and me to the kindergarten attached to Hackney Hospital and went to work. All I remember of this is being collected from the nursery, put into a push-chair and going to London Fields market. At the end of the market was a dairy produce shop, where the butter was dispensed by large noisy men wielding grooved "paddles". As a child, I regularly got the special treat - a curl of butter dipped in sugar.

Friday night was bath night, a large oval galvanised tin bath, filled with hot water from the wood-burning boiler in the bathroom, which Muriel and I shared. Sunday was outing day in fine weather - mostly this was a visit to Victoria Park. When I was old enough, I went to Scawfell Street School, but not for long. In 1935, while I was still four, we moved to a "proper" flat - a ground floor flat in one of the five blocks comprising the Samuel Lewis Trust Dwellings in Dalston Lane. The first memory I have is of the gas lighting being replaced by electric lights and me being too small to reach the new switch. (I also remember the ritual lighting of the gas "mantles".) I kept looking at the ceiling where the gas light and the piping to it used to be. It was clearly marked by some not-sosmooth plasterwork, which meant to me that the gaslight might return at any time.

I was now at Infants school at Sigdon Road - now called Amhurst Primary. Muriel, being over two years older, was in a different class. I was either a sensitive non-violent child or I was a complete wimp, depending on how you look at these things. There I was with no-one to look after me, in a hostile environment. I was no match for any of my peers, and had not too happy a time of it. Muriel always stood up for me whenever she could, but what I really lacked was friends. The most vivid memory of this time is of a particularly cold playtime when, in trying to keep my hands warm (quite impossible), I had my fists clenched, only to be challenged to a fight. However, I must have been OK academically, since eventually I passed what was then called the Junior County Scholarship. This was at eleven years of age, and it gave me a place at the local grammar school in Hackney Downs.

But at home, life was much better - full of warmth and fun. We had Sunday outings to Lyons Corner House in the Strand. We'd all get dressed up and go across the road to the bus stop in Dalston Lane. I always held my dad's little finger for crossing the road. If there was a queue, we always went to the front, because dad used a crutch. This was due to a childhood accident (resulting in amputation above the right knee) but it seems that people always assumed it was a war injury. (I suppose, in a way, it was since he was knocked down in a street accident.) Anyway, we'd be first on to the 38 bus, and, with any luck, we'd get all four front seats upstairs. So the panorama would flow past for the next 15 minutes: Balls Pond Road, Rosebery Avenue, Theobalds Road, Shaftesbury Avenue. Then a walk down to Trafalgar Square, and Lyons Corner House. A string trio playing, we had sardines on toast and silver service tea.

At other times we visited relatives, mostly living in flats in a tight community in Tenterden Street in the East End, near Commercial Street. (This was right on top of Petticoat Lane market, but we never went there.) There was Auntie Nellie (dad's sister) and Uncle Mark. She of the mad staring eyes, he of the velvet voice. Their kitchen (scullery?) turned out to be a bathroom as well - the "table" was a wooden top over the bath. They had one son, Ronnie, a very smooth sophisticated person, or so it seemed to me. Then there was Auntie Eva, a great coarse woman, and Uncle Dave, who was a bus driver. They had a son Laurie who wore pebble-thick glasses and spoke very enthusiastically. In the flats in Dalston Lane was a sister of Auntie Doris, "Auntie" Gertie. I think maybe she was divorced and she used plenty of make-up. Certainly, she had style. Her (second) husband was Jack Salt, always referred to by his full name to distinguish him from dad. And last, and gloriously larger than life was dad's brother, Uncle Morry and his wife Auntie Doris. They had two daughters, Maureen (who had a soft spot for me, and I for her) who I called "Warmy" and Helen who was incredibly tall. Morry had pop-eyes and an infectiously happy nature, combined with a loud voice. Doris was tall, stylish and had the most expressive voice (in the Jewish style) I've ever heard. Doris and mum would go shopping together in Ridley Road market, they were known there as "the tall Mrs Schuman and the short Mrs Schuman".

On mum's side, there were sisters Sarah and Esther and Jessie. Auntie Sarah was a cor-blimey cockney from Bethnal Green, married to Uncle Lew, a taxi-driver. They had three children, Irene, Maurice and Sheila, who was much younger than the others. The visits I remember were to their new home in Hendon, they having been "bombed-out" of East London. This seemed like paradise, a house (not a flat) with a garden. To go there meant a long journey by train (Dalston Junction to Finchley Road & Frognal) and bus (113). The atmosphere there was always exciting, occasionally Sheila made me sit still while she combed my hair. Auntie Ettie (the maiden aunt) lived with them, after having lived with her sister Jessie until her sudden death. I never met Jessie, but mum used to talk about her in a way which suggested that Jessie was the most cultured of the four. (Now I realise it may have meant that mum was.) And then there were the grandmothers - the grandfathers were both dead before I knew anything about them, partly because mum and dad waited such a long time before having children, (mum was 40 years older than me). On my father's side, a large coarse-featured woman who suffered from asthma. Consequently, she was always associated in my mind with towels, steam and strange smells. On my mother's side, a tiny, charming white-haired old lady who smiled a lot and had a soft voice, who we called booba. Neither of them could speak a word of English, both of them having been well into middle age at the time of immigration, and perhaps felt no need to make the effort, leaving that sort of thing to their children.

There was another Uncle Dave (Herman) but his precise role escapes me at the moment. I think, anyway, that he and his family moved to South Wales during the war. And there was Auntie Leah, another of dad's sisters, who later moved to Sidcup. So, by necessity, it was dad's side of the family that we saw most of, since we all lived near each other. Indeed, with dad, Morry and Doris, Gertie and Jack and sometimes Eva and Dave, there were frequent and noisy get-togethers in our flat. In contrast, when we visited Uncle Alec in Enfield, everything was tranquil and dreamlike. Of course he wasn't an uncle at all, but a friend of dad's who lived with his wife Cissie and daughter Sonia in a real house with a garden. It felt to me like Cissie was the Good Fairy and Sonia an extra sister. Alec was a carpenter and smoked

a malodorous pipe with impish glee. As a carpenter he was a genius - we still have the marvellous bedroom suite he made for mum and dad's wedding present.

It seemed that all the noisy relatives played solo, and the others just sat and talked (or knitted). Muriel and I would be in the bedroom (next room) trying to get to sleep, dreading when that moment came - the end of another game. All hell was let loose, recriminations and abuse freely distributed, until one of the quiet ones (mum) would remind them about us trying to sleep. When that didn't work, I would sometimes appear, bleary-eyed, at the door of the bedroom to make the point. The scene that greeted me was like Dante's inferno, with wild-eyed people shouting and gesticulating and smoke everywhere. There were other visitors, refugees from Germany with some distant connection. Many of these lived in a large house in West Hampstead; there was always an intensely intellectual atmosphere there. And a piano. With fervent debate raging, I once sat down and experimented on this strange monster. After a little while, it all went quiet, because, with one finger, I was playing the first subject of Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto. Mum was inundated with good advice (make sure he has lessons), but no-one seemed to notice that mum and dad couldn't possibly afford them.

Another visitor was "Uncle" Mischa, also a refugee, who gave me a beautiful humming-top for my 6th birthday. He showed me how to make it spin and it made the most gorgeous noise, so serene. After a while, I took it out on to the (communal) porch to try it out. Tragedy struck! A jealous boy kicked it, and dented it and the spinning-top sang no more.As children of poor parents, I think we benefited occasionally from "rich" uncles, in the way of presents. Later on I had a Hornby Meccano set, full of screws, nuts, girders, pulleys etc, which I thoroughly enjoyed. And, most significantly, a bicycle when I was 11. But, for the most part, we joined in the playground games with the children from the other 209 flats in "the buildings". Glarnies (marbles) was always popular, with a variation adapted to the sloping surface of the "porch" floor. This was races between marbles carefully wrapped in a silver-paper copy of the Thunderbird racing-car, which had just captured the world land speed record. Another game was a sort of combination of cricket and baseball, using 4 pieces of firewood as a "wicket". This was called rounders, the bat being any handy piece of wood. There were also numerous ball games, played up against the window-less end walls of each block of flats.

When that got too boring, there was always jumping on the buses outside the flats (where they slowed down for an unofficial stop) and leaving it as late as possible to jump off before either the bus got too fast or the conductor shouted at you. One day, waiting to jump off standing on the platform with one foot trailing, I suddenly found myself in a predicament. My trailing foot had somehow slipped under the platform, and I couldn't work out how to extricate it while the bus was moving. Since the bus was getting faster, I had to do something, so I let go, and got a nasty bump on the head for my troubles. 1 don't think I played that game any more.

Once a week we would go to the cinema at Dalston Junction, all the family together. There we saw films like Fantasia, Bambi and Victory Through Air Power (all Disney lies). Other days we would go to "the downs" (Hackney Downs - an open park) and play some bat and ball games. Some time late in the 30's, Cousin Minnie came to live with us. She wasn't our cousin, and was a German-Jewish refugee. I seem to remember family arguments about who should "look after" her. In fact she was very independent, got a job in a local factory and paid her way. She was a great socialiser, but did find the language difficult. She loved the cinema, especially (as she called him) George Fromby. After a while, she did not live with us any more - had she become a detainee because of the war, I wonder?

My school career, interrupted by evacuation, continued at Sigdon Road until I was 11. Taking the junior county exam should have meant a place in the local grammar school. Since that was evacuated "in toto", and I was not about to leave home again, I went instead to a mixture of Central School (Laura Place) and secondary (Upton Manor), until I was 13. Laura Place, a girls' school, was co-ed for the emergency, and I quite enjoyed it there, especially the French lessons. We would be sitting in the classroom waiting for Mlle. Labadie, making the usual sort of din. Then someone would say "listen", and

there, along the corridor, we could hear the tap-tap-tap of her stiletto heels getting nearer, and silence reigned. Upton Manor was a boys' school, with one or two quite sadistic ex-army people working there. I didn't enjoy it there. It seems that anything to do with PE was always organised by sadists. I would cower in the cloakroom rather than face the rigours of the gymnasium. Another memory of Sigdon Road is to do with the local swimming baths. I was made to go in the water (ie pushed in) which ensured that I would never swim.

Then there was a strange change in my life. It affected school, relatives and the market. It was called, for some reason, the second world war, and I was almost nine years old when it happened. Soon after we were evacuated. The biggest change for me was school. It was shut, on the orders of the government. Their idea of boosting morale was to forcibly split families up. They called it evacuation. The children went away the parents stayed and worked, contributing to the "war effort". Incredibly, this was presented as being "better for..the children", the myth being that it was safer outside London. We now know that quite a lot of working-class parents didn't see it that way, and refused to send their kids away. But the pressure on them was enormous, propaganda was the new government technique for controlling people - and those that did resist were made to feel bad. Plus the fact that the schools were shut. In any case, even though mum voted communist, dad had too much respect for authority. Muriel and I were packed off.

I remember the train journey - it was the first time I'd seen the countryside. Every time the train went over a river, I'd say "look, mummy, water". As for cows in the fields - wow! We went to King's Lynn, and from there to Walpole St Peter by bus. I don't remember the details, but no doubt there were billeting officers dealing with, on the one hand, kids from London, and on the other hand, local farmers, etc. in various states of reluctance. Mum was told that we'd have to be split up - this must have been agony for her. But it was OK, they said, because we were going to be next door neighbours. Muriel went to the Benson family, who seemed like a happy crowd. I went to the Bailey's, who had no children and probably hated them. We did not get on very well. I think Muriel was well treated, but she was no longer in a position to "stick up for me". The next door neighbours turned out to be half-a-mile away. Of course we visited each other, sometimes with disastrous results. I was left to find my own way "home" after dark once. It was my first experience of complete, black, darkness, which I have never forgotten. They say animals can smell fear - well they certainly would have smelled me by the time I got back to the Bailey's. I wouldn't say I was treated with sympathy and understanding on that occasion; something in the order of: "go to your room and no supper for you tonight".

I did spend some pleasant summer days (1940) on the Benson farm - I think I managed to make myself sick on about six varieties of fruit. The Benson boys were a few years older than me, and liked to show off in their built-in gymnasium - the barn with bales of hay in it. I was used to seeing children showing off in our concrete playground, so a somersault was nothing new. But, a somersault with no hands! I could hardly believe my eyes. School was three miles away, and we walked, which gave the young boys and girls ample opportunity to do furtive things in ditches on the way. This was certainly new for me. It was at this time that my maternal grandmother died. We were on a country road in the middle of nowhere, mum had come to visit us and I remember being told that "booba had died". She cuddled both of us, and Muriel cried a bit - but I remember not feeling anything; it didn't seem real. Mum could only afford to visit us once a month.

During one visit, in the winter, I complained about a chilblain on my toe. “Take your sock off and show me” said mum. It was when I tried to and the sock stuck to the toe that she got really worried, and we went home soon after. But only for a few weeks, then to Kettering to stay with a nice friendly family. Friendly, that is, except for the sadistic younger son whose bed I shared. The elder daughter had a birthday, but I had no money to spend on a present. So I skulked around Woolworth and half-inched a bottle of perfume to give to her. She looked somewhat startled, but thanked me nicely. Which shows what a nice family they were, because it was ‘Odor-O-No’, a deodorant.

After having been away from home for two years, Muriel and I went home, just in time for doodlebugs and V2s. I raced down Greenwood Road one day after a doodlebug had landed, and saw the dust and chaos of war. When the V2s came we were apalled to find that you heard them coming *after* they had arrived. Sitting quietly listening to the radio one evening, mum, Ettie, Muriel and I were shocked by a horribly loud bang, No damage to our flat but windows broken in some others. The V2 had landed in the playground of Sigdon Road school, about 300 yards away. By some freak circumstance, there was very little blast damage, and the school proved to be almost impervious to such trifles, just a cracked wall. So, no holiday for us!

At 13, my whole life changed, quite apart from the fact that this (according to Jewish custom) is the age of manhood (huh!). We were much too poor to give me the indulgence of a barmitzvah, so we just went through the motions. I was given the ritual scarf, silk with a fringe at each end, and started to attend synagogue. There I was expected to learn Hebrew, and thus read through the Old Testament, and also learn to chant (or mutter) the ritual prayers. Since I was by this time a confirmed atheist, I did not get very far with this program. In fact, after a few weeks, I refused to attend any more Hebrew lessons. I think dad was neutral about the whole thing, but mum thought I should continue, since "it's all knowledge". Religion, we all agreed, had nothing to do with it. We observed none of the domestic rituals, but mum in particular stressed how important it was not to upset people. So we didn't travel on the Sabbath, or play noisy games.

Dad had no time for religion, and had strong socialist ideas. There were plenty of left-wing books in the house, and I went through an obsessive reading phase. Most of Bernard Shaw, H G Wells and various science-fiction. This was all happening against a background of dramatic changes in my daily life. I entered and passed a "trade" examination, and from then on said goodbye to the academic life. I found myself attending a 3-year full-time course at Hackney Technical Institute, biased towards engineering. Hence the emphasis was on the sciences, as well as English, maths, history and geography. This was wonderful, no more tyrannical headmasters, but with people who treat you as a human being. In particular, Mr Rosten, the maths teacher, encouraged me greatly, and I began to develop the affinity for maths which I still have.

I started to do well at school, and mum started to be proud of me; she and Mr Rosten got on fine together. I started to meet other people with strong political views, among them John Tuchfeld. He was a highly articulate communist, and we supported each other in the many discussions (arguments?) which sprang up. Since this was at the time (during the war) when the Soviet Union was recognised an an ally, there was a great deal of political ferment around the ideas of socialism and communism. At home, mum and dad had always been left-wing, but dad insisted on democratic socialism. Muriel and I became active communists; she joined the YCL and later on so did I, although I never acquired a sense of belonging.

Another event now occurred with life-changing consequences: I was given a bicycle. This was a 24" wheel roadster with a single freewheel, and it had chromium-plated accessories - very rare then. It had belonged to my cousin Ronnie, but since his mother (Auntie Nellie) was too nervous to let him ride it outside their playground, she asked mum "if Sidney would like a bicycle". Mum was never one to turn down a free gift, so I got my first bike. I got on it in the playground, just outside the porch, and turned the pedals. Off I went, but the steering seemed to have a mind of its own. I turned remorselessly and irrevocably towards the wall of the block of flats in which I lived, and hit it. At first, like cousin Ronnie, I was allowed to ride my bike only in the playground. Mum knew that I had started to go "round the block", but she said nothing, apart from recommending caution. I soon found a friend with a bike, and we started to go on "next left, next right" adventures, to see where we would end up. His name was Harry Tashman (sic!). I doubt if we ever went more than 2 miles away, Hackney was our universe.

As I was growing quite quickly now, the 24" wheels became inadequate - I needed a bigger bike. So dad took me along in 1944 to one of the James Grose cycle shops, in Euston Road. All the bikes on offer

were "utility" bikes - no chrome, all black enamel, very inferior quality metal. I was determined to have dropped handlebars (with cable brakes) and so I got my first sports bike. It had 3 gears and cost £12. By now, I had formed friendships outside the flats, notably Sid Kenton (was Kirschenbaum) from the Pembury Estate, Larry Lamb (whose father was caretaker at the Electricity Board showroom in Hoxton) and John Swift (who was very soft-spoken and slightly deaf). We were all energetic cyclists, and started to go out on longer and longer rides, culminating in a notable Southend and back ride. With a strong westerly wind, we got there in about two hours, spent the day there and left to come home at 6pm. Then we learnt our first lesson about headwinds and energy conservation. We had very little left, and got home at 11pm, exhausted.

Thus ended my preparation for adulthood.