

I make a start

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 a house in 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 2½ years old, 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 (although my father's was the larger), 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 2 or 3 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.

Anyway, to get back to baby me. 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 put into a push-chair and going to London Fields market (after being at the nursery?). At the end of the market was a dairy product 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 goodness knows where, 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. I was still too small to reach the new switch. (In fact, I do

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-so-smooth plasterwork, which seemed to imply that the gaslight could return at any time.

I was now at Infants school at Sigdon Road. (This is now Amhurst Primary, distinguished by its new playground, of which more later.) Muriel, being 2½ years older, was in a different class. I was either a sensitive non-violent child or I was a complete wimp, depending how you look at these things, so 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.) Life was much better at home, full of warmth and fun.