Remembering My Jewish Father

Edward M. Bruner *University of Illinois*

I

While growing up as a Jew in New York City in the 1930s, I learned that Jews were not only different but were spatially and spiritually segregated. Most obviously one could see this in the physical layout of the city, in the landscape and social demography. The upper west side of Manhattan, where we lived, was a Jewish neighbourhood, the upper east side was for Gentiles, and African Americans lived in Harlem. In Rockaway, a seaside resort where we spent the summers, a stroll along the ocean front would take you from the Jewish neighbourhood, to the Irish one, the Italian one, the African American one, and beyond that, past 130th Street, to the area where no Jews were allowed. I don't know what that neighbuorhood was like, as I never went there, but in my mind, it was elite, upper class, fancy and somehow populated by people who were different from us. Just walking about the city or along the oceanfront confirmed and constructed these ethnic differences.

Born in 1896 in New York, my father was a German Jew and told me stories of how his family was related to the Guggenheims, although I never met a Guggenheim or saw any evidence of such a connection. He worked as a dress salesman in the garment district and he deprecated the East European Jews who he said were too Jewish, even though many of them owned their own businesses and were more successful and affluent than he was. Such feelings were commonplace at that time among Jewish populations in the United States, Canada, Britain and Central Europe. The problem in our family was that my mother was an East European Jew and every time there was a quarrel my father would call my mother a kike and denigrate her for being the wrong kind of Jew. Thus there was a hierarchy, from Gentiles to German Jews, and then East European Jews like my mother. It left me in a quandary, as I was from the body of my father and the body of my mother, so what was I? Where did I fit? Of course, these days such distinctions seem so remote, but

when I grew up in the 1920s and 1930s in New York and within our family, they were critical. My father was a self-hating, anti-Semitic Jew.

My father always reminded me that I had to watch my manners, especially at the dinner table, and I had to learn not to make noise when I ate, or to bend over the plate, or to eat too voraciously, because the Gentiles might be watching. I had to set a good example at meal time and at other times, otherwise I would be labelled a kike, and rightly so, by some alert Gentile. My father seemed to live in deadly fear of this accusation. As a young child, most of my learning situations were accompanied not simply by a routine correction but with the threat of being exposed, publicly and disgracefully, as a Jew. Thus I lived my early life, and sadly part of my adult life, with the image in mind of the accusing Gentiles. I never found myself in a situation of being labelled a Jew because of my manners, but this didn't seem to change my perception. My father had, in my young mind, just enough credibility so that one never knew if he might be right.

I do know that in 1954, then 30 years old, when I returned to the east coast to take up my first teaching job in New Haven, I thought then of my father's fears and those early years. After all, at Yale I was in the midst of the Gentiles, all of whom probably lived way beyond 130th Street on the seashore in Rockaway Park—or on other shores beyond my imagination. Those Yalies were indeed the Other, and I was sure they could tell I was a Jew by my table manners—which by then actually were perfected beyond reproach—and in all sorts of subtle ways, by my dress, demeanour, gestures and speech. They knew, and even though I never denied being a Jew, I didn't advertise it either. That the Yalies were not so secure either, or that the institution truly welcomed a bright young scholar, whatever his origin, or that I myself never experienced anti-Semitism at Yale didn't seem to penetrate my consciousness or affect my feelings about myself.

Of course, I had evidence early in life to support my father's beliefs. During my senior year in Stuyvesant High School, the 1941-42 academic year, I applied to a number of colleges including Columbia. I will always remember my interview at Columbia. I went there with high hopes. Stuyvesant was one of the best schools in New York, one of the few public schools that required a test for admission. I had done well there and especially on my New York State Regents examinations. Armed with a score of 98 on my Regents history exam, a 96 in English, and comparable scores in other fields, I was confident. Further, in Stuyvesant I had been placed in the advanced math class for the bright kids. That was something, to be placed in the bright group in a bright school. I mention this not to be boastful, but to explain why I expected to be accepted at Columbia. Besides the scores on exams, I was an intellectual kid. Never very good at sports, though no sissy, I identified myself as an intellectual. The interview at Columbia did go beautifully, or so I thought. The interviewer and I spent much of the time discussing Dostoyevsky, for I had just read *Crime and Punishment* and was into *The Brothers Karamazov*. Imagine my surprise then, when in the mail, I received notice that at Columbia I had been placed in Category 3. Category 1 was immediate admission, Category 5 was rejection and Category 3, I understood, was for the Jewish kids who were placed in a pool from whom some would be selected up to the limits of the Jewish quota. These quotas at Columbia, Yale and other Ivy League schools were not lifted until the 1960s and the anti-Semitism in New York and in America during my formative years was arguably the most severe in American history.

I wasn't actively seeking to fight anti-Semitism in my youth, but one of the fights I did get into was, ironically, one of the events that elicited the most joy and respect from my father. I was with my father on a Sunday in Central Park at the handball courts. A boy of approximately my own age, about 12 or 13, had called me a kike with no provocation as far as I was aware. He just passed by, looked me in the eye, and rather loudly said "kike." It was too much, and I immediately grabbed him by the arm, spun him around, and said, "take that back." He refused, of course, and we began to fight. Neither of us was very skilled and the combat was rather slow paced with much circling around. He would hit me, I would hit him, and we circled some more. The fight was like an avant garde novel, with no closure, or clear-cut ending, or even dramatic action. But in this slow waltz of the Christian and the Jew, the two combatants gathered around them quite a crowd on that Sunday afternoon. Play stopped on the handball courts as everyone, including my father, formed a large moving circle around the fighters, making remarks, commenting on the event and encouraging their favourite. The audience on that Sunday afternoon was less concerned with the anti-Semitic rationale of the conflict than in the action of the fighting itself, such as it was. After a while the fighting was stopped, for everyone had enough, both the fighters and the audience. What I recall most about that incident was my father's pride. He praised me more for that fight than for my highest academic achievements or later, my score on any New York State Regents examinations. He was so proud that he took me home in a taxi, an unprecedented event for a Sunday afternoon. He related every detail and movement of the fight to my mother and he talked about it for days. I didn't real-

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ize it then, but I believe now that I was the combatant in the fight my father never fought. Or maybe the anti-Semitic boy, who called me a kike, as my father called my mother a kike, became merged in my young mind. Possibly in fighting that boy I was fighting my father and defending my mother.

Institutional anti-Semitism in the Ivy Leagues continued through the 1950s. Charles Osgood took me to lunch at the Yale Graduate Club and informed me that about 1939, Edward Sapir, the great poet, anthropologist and linguist, had been denied admission to the Club because he was Jewish. It was a story about the past but I was eating my lunch in that club and for me it had immediate resonance. It was a crushing blow to Sapir, said Osgood, who admired him greatly. In New Haven in the 1950s, there were two swimming and tennis clubs, one that did admit Jews and another club that had the policy of "no Jews allowed." I was accustomed to that kind of segregation and it didn't particularly disturb me, but what was bothersome was that some faculty members in my college, some supposedly liberal academics, belonged to the other club, the one that didn't admit Jews. I never said anything about it, and I didn't even react when some of my colleagues made a point of telling me that the other club, the one that denied me admission, had better tennis courts, which they said is why they had joined it. Maybe that club did have better facilities, I don't know, as I never went there. Or maybe my father was correct after all, that the Gentiles were out there waiting for us Jews to make a social blunder or to be too pushy, waiting to denounce and expose us. While at Yale I never discussed my thoughts with other Jews, with students, faculty or people in the community, although I could have. I kept my feelings secret.

II

My father never went to high school but he read voraciously and regularly completed the crossword puzzles in the *New York Herald Tribune*. He always enjoyed a good drink and a lively party and he had a lovely baritone voice and a violent temper. The thing about my father's temper is that it was so unpredictable. Something would set him off and he would rant and rave, break dishes, scream and wave his fists. My mother and I were afraid of him.

After my father retired as a salesman my parents moved to California. My mother was delighted to leave New York and excited at the prospect of growing her own flowers in front of their garden apartment in a retirement community in Orange County. When my mother died in 1971, I immediately left for California from Illinois where I was teaching to attend the funeral and to spend time with my father. The ceremony was to be performed by the American Legion, as my father was a World War I veteran, and neither of my parents wanted a religious funeral. As my father explained, he and my mother had made plans before she died that they would be cremated and their remains deposited together in a mausoleum in San Diego reserved for veterans of the armed forces and their spouses. My father noted further that the burial arrangements were a veteran's benefit, provided free of charge by the government, and both he and my mother took advantage of it. I was slightly uneasy about my mother, a gentle woman, in a military mausoleum, but after all, it was her wish and I knew she always loved a bargain. The plan was that after my father died, he too would be cremated and his remains would join my mother's in San Diego.

Shortly after my mother's death my father met Blossom, an attractive Catholic widow in her 60s. They married, he converted to Catholicism, joined the local Catholic Church and sang hymns in the choir. Previously in New York, my father had never practiced Judaism, nor had our family affiliated with a Jewish temple. I was sent to a temple Sunday School at the urging of the extended family but dropped out after one semester, much to my parents' relief. I did not have a bar mitzvah and Jewish rituals were never performed in our home, nor were Jewish holidays observed.

I was happy that my father had found a new life in California after my mother had passed away. Why should he not enjoy life in his declining years? They were, however, tumultuous years for my father and Blossom. They would fight, separate, reunite and then declare their everlasting love. They eventually divorced after my father found that Blossom had thrown all his clothes and belongings out into the street. But they still saw each other, for according to Blossom, they might have been divorced but they were still married in the eyes of the Church. As my father put it, they were working out their relationship. I never understood it all but it was not my place to judge. Personally, I did not especially like Blossom and I too had constant conflicts with my father.

My father died at the age of 81 and I went out west to make the funeral arrangements and to take care of the estate, although that was minimal. There I learned from Blossom that she and my father had made new burial plans. My father was to have a Catholic funeral, and was to be buried in a Catholic cemetery in Los Angeles in a plot reserved for Blossom's family. It was my father's wish, said Blossom, that she and my father were to be buried in adjacent plots, "so that they could be together for all eternity." "But what about my mother," I cried as I thought of

her in San Diego, cremated, by herself, with all those cremated military families. In reassuring tones, Blossom said that she and my father had thought of that. They had made arrangements that my mother's remains, her ashes in an urn, were to be placed in my father's coffin.

It took me some time to appreciate the predicament in which my mother would find herself. She would be with her husband, in his coffin, at his feet, she still Jewish, he Catholic, with Blossom's deceased husband on one side of Blossom and my father in his plot on the other. Blossom had surrounded herself with her former husbands. My mother would be next to the woman who had replaced her as my father's wife. My father had broken his sacred trust with my mother and he too had managed to have his two spouses next to him, one at his feet, reduced to ashes, and the other as skeleton in the adjacent plot by his side. What a cruel fate for my gentle mother and "for all eternity." My mother's relationship with my father was not that much different in death than in life, for he had always belittled and humiliated her. If she had known, maybe she would have preferred to have remained in San Diego.

III

In 1980, I joined a subsidized B'nai B'rith Hillel tour for Jewish academics who had never been to Israel, designed to induce the participants to become more educated about Israel and hopefully more involved in Jewish life at their home universities. After my parents had passed away, I had become more interested in Jewish things and in Israel, although initially my commitment was very tentative. The tour included a trip to Masada, which I found to be a deeply moving experience. At first I saw myself in romantic terms as a Jewish pilgrim, as a pleasure seeking tourist, as a fantasy adventurer, and sometimes as an ethnographer. I later wrote a professional article about Masada that dealt with the narrative of Jewish resistance against the Romans. My paper focused on alternative ways of being Jewish—to fight at Masada, to accommodate to the Romans, to become a Roman, to retreat into Jewish tradition as did Rabbi Johanan ben Zakki, or to lose oneself in the Diaspora. Although I may not have been conscious of it at the time, the paper I wrote on ways of being Jewish was the problem that I had struggled with all my life, and the options were entwined and entangled with my relationship with my father. My anthropological article on dialogic narration at Masada was indeed a superb sublimation for someone who couldn't face the reality of his own situation. The options available to the Jews 2,000 years ago were essentially the same options available to me. But in the Masada article I said nothing about the personal meanings of Jewishness, even though my paper appeared in the same volume as Renato Rosaldo's now famous paper on "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage," in which Renato expressed his deepest feelings over his wife's death. Why did I silence myself then? Maybe at that time, I was not yet emotionally or psychologically ready.

I purchased some ancient coins from the First Jewish Revolt in 70-73 A.D., the time Masada was occupied by the zealots who had resisted the Romans. I had one coin made into a pendant which I wore as a necklace around my neck. After my second trip to Masada in 1984 with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as faculty in a student abroad program, I purchased additional coins from both the first and the second Jewish Wars, adding to my collection of coins of Jewish resistance. It was a circuitous route and it took me some years to realize it, but I had chosen, at least then, symbolically, the route of the zealots—resistance.

In 1984, I had a second pendant made from a coin from the period of the Bar Kochba revolt, the second war of 132-135 A.D., which became a significant symbol not only of my identification with Jewish resistance but also a marker of my own childhood. That coin, somehow, represented my way of dealing with the anti-Semitism I grew up with during the 1930s in New York City. It brought back memories of the period in the late 1930s walking on my way home from Stuyvesant High School on 17th Street to our apartment, then in Greenwich Village. I would pass through Union Square, a public meeting place, where every school day, one could hear fascist diatribes against the Jews. That coin evoked remembrances of the time in Central Park when I got into a fist fight with the boy who had called me a kike. During that childhood fight, I fought to defend my Jewishness, in opposition to my father. My father was ashamed of being a Jew, but also ambivalent, as indicated by his pride in my having fought the anti-Semitic boy, which was not just my fight but his as well.

I am wearing that second pendant from the Bar Kochba revolt as I write these words. It is special. It is a silver tetrachaderm (or sela) from the third year of the second Jewish war, probably 134 A.D. During that period the Jews took Roman coins and re-struck them with Jewish designs representing the new Jewish state, as they did not have their own mint. The coins were originally Roman with the figure of an emperor—Nero, Vespasian or Titus. The Bar Kochba minters, with a hammer, obliterated the face of the Roman emperor and substituted an image of the facade of the second Temple on one side, which they hoped to rebuild, and on the other side, in ancient Hebrew writing, the words *For the Freedom of Jerusalem*. On my particular coin, however, and the rea-

son I bought it, was that the hammering was shallow, it didn't go deep enough, because the shadowy face of the Roman emperor Vespasian could still be seen, peaking out from behind the edge of the Jewish temple. As a symbolic anthropologist, I could not resist purchasing that coin and wearing it as a pendant where it could be seen. The coin at the time may have been simply another in my collection, but now that coin means to me that my own Jewishness has been re-stamped over the image of the oppressive emperor, my anti-Semitic father. *Freud, schmoid.* Just as Vespasian was there lurking behind the second Jewish temple, so too my father was there lurking within my psyche and my soul, and neither could be stamped out with even the heaviest of hammers. The image of Vespasian was a physical residue; the image of my father was not corporeal but a psychological residue. Little did I realize what a tourist journey to Masada would come to signify.

Jewish travel and the souvenirs of a journey had come to take on the most deeply personal meanings going to the very core of my being—meanings that, like culture, are contested, ambiguous, sometimes unconscious, retrospectively interpreted and reinterpreted and that construct and reconstruct the self. Telling stories about a journey, about Jewish travel, helps me to make sense of it all. The constitutive power of a story is less in the telling and more in the continual retellings, which in turn transform the "memory" of the original experience. These retellings help me to feel more comfortable with myself. I used to think, as I wrote in another article on narrative, that stories have clear beginnings, middles and endings. Some do, but not always. Sometimes, beginnings are obscure, middles are inchoate and endings never really end. Roman emperors and anti-Semitic fathers, to fight or retreat, Masada or conciliation, Israel or America, how to live as a secular Jew in the Diaspora. I am still working on it, but it all is becoming clearer.

Edward M. Bruner, Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois, 109 Davenport Hall, 607 S. Mathews Ave., Urbana IL, 61801, U.S.A. E-mail: ebruner@illinois.edu.