

**FROM RIGA TO  
RISHPON  
THE LIFE STORY  
OF LEON HODES  
Rishpon, Israel  
1963<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information in footnotes supplied by Leon's grandson, Jeremy Hodes PhD in January 2024



*Figure 1 Leon Hodes in Rishpon, Israel shortly before his death in November 1963*

## PREFACE<sup>2</sup>

The man who assassinated President John F. Kennedy indirectly took another life that of our father, Lean Hodes.

The link with President Kennedy was that Leon's middle son, Aubrey, was the senior translator and interpreter at the United States Embassy, in Tel Aviv, from 1959 to 1965. Leon, who lived with his wife Rachel at Moshav Rishpon, a farming settlement north of Tel Aviv, was writing a commentary on the Old Testament. He asked Aubrey to bring some reference books when he came for lunch on Saturday, as he did every weekend as a regular arrangement.

All this changed when President Kennedy was killed. The news came through to Tel Aviv on Friday afternoon. The Ambassador asked Aubrey to work on Saturday and Sunday, translating the Hebrew entries in the book of condolence, and interpreting for the many public figures expected to flock to the Embassy. Aubrey sent a message to his parents that he was unable to come to lunch as usual. He worked until late both nights and came home exhausted.

Monday was another busy day at the Embassy. President Kennedy was to be buried that day, and Aubrey wanted to listen to the broadcast from Washington at 6:30 p.m. When he came home to Herzlia Pituach at about 5, he found his father there, anxious to collect the books he needed for his research.

Leon had brought along his little brown suitcase, with a chicken, some fruit from the farm, and a few books he was returning. The family had an early evening meal, played with the grandchildren, and talked about Kennedy's assassination. Leon chose the books he wanted and put them in his suitcase. Then he left to catch the bus to the moshav, two stops north on the main road from Tel Aviv to Natanya, and Aubrey settled down to listen to the broadcast of the funeral.

But Leon did not arrive at his home, and after a sleepless night the family was called to the hospital morgue to identify a man, matching Leon's description, who had been mortally injured, while crossing the main Tel Aviv to Haifa thoroughfare, by a lorry carrying vegetables to Tel Aviv.

The Jerusalem Post of November 27 1963 had a brief report on page three: "Leon Hodes, 70, of Rishpon, was knocked down by a lorry as he crossed the main road near Kfar Shmaryahu at 6:30 Monday evening. He died of his injuries in Ichilov Hospital shortly after midnight the same night."

Found with the body, and assisting in its identification, was the tattered brown suitcase that never left his side. In addition to the books, it contained a manuscript with this life story.

In accordance with Jewish custom, Leon was buried the same day.

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<sup>2</sup> Written by Leon's son, Dr Meyer Hodes

Tuesday, November 26, 1963. Several of Aubrey's non-Jewish colleagues from the Embassy attended the funeral. They were deeply moved, and one of them commented, "It was as if we were mourning two people: President Kennedy and your father."

Leon's life story languished in a closet for many years, but came to light recently. It is printed here, for the enlightenment of family members, as a record of a past generation. There are some discrepancies in the telling of his story: certain events (perhaps unspeakable to him) are glossed over, others are over-emphasised. But, with minimal editing by his children, here is the history as it was found in the brown suitcase. It must be remembered that it was written in the early 1960's. Factually, these memoirs represent a life no different from that of hundreds of thousands of Jews who left Russia and other Eastern European countries to escape virulent anti-semitism and economic hardship.

Leon Hodes was a man whose actions were defined, not by sentiment, but by necessity and duty. He was a highly principled man, scrupulously honest, who maintained his integrity both in business and in his private life. He was always sympathetic to the problems of his staff, tenants and customers. The system of apartheid was anathema to him.

Despite little formal education, Leon Hodes became a man of learning and culture and a homespun philosopher. His greatest delight was to immerse himself in English literary masterpieces, particularly Shakespeare. He once translated "Macbeth" into Yiddish for the benefit of his father. He happily spent many hours comparing editions of the Bible in English, Hebrew and Afrikaans.

As Leon mentions in his memoirs, a book and pipe would suffice for his amusement. Smoking a pipe with one of the strongest tobaccos available was one of his indulgences, and when he settled in Israel no local tobacco was strong enough for his taste: his former brand was sent by air mail from South Africa.

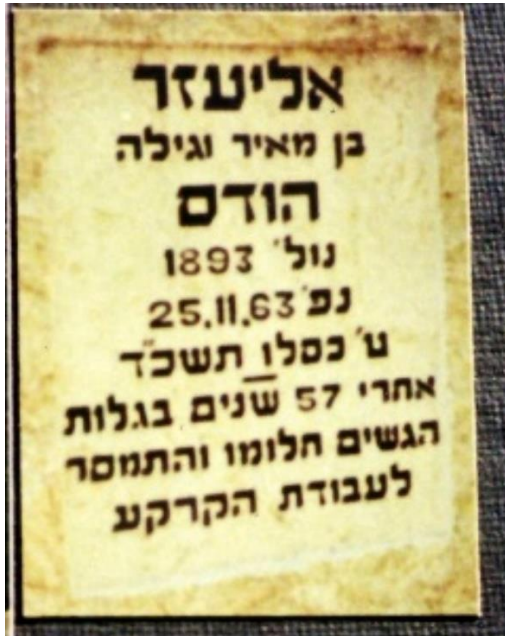
Films did not attract his custom. He maintained that the story and the meaning of life could be categorised under a few subject headings, such as Jealousy, love, etc. Seeing one film of each category made it unnecessary to view films in future, as films could not compete with the Bible in understanding life.

Leon Hodes was truly an idealist. He believed in, and tried to follow, Biblical precepts and matters of the spirit. Like many idealists, he did not pursue material gains, and did not always succeed in applying to his ideals the touchstone of practicality.

Paradoxically, he was both a devoted family man and a staunch individualist, and found a happy combination by settling in the land of his Fathers. Alas, the grim realities did not quite match his fondest dreams, but he remained the incurable optimist. He was cruelly struck down before his ultimate hopes could be attained. He bequeathed to his family the cherished blessing of unquenchable good cheer.

A true Zionist, Leon Hodes unfortunately did not live to experience the thrill of a united Jerusalem. He had the joy and satisfaction of seeing each of his children produce a new generation.

On his tombstone are inscribed, in Hebrew, these words: "After 57 year's in the Diaspora he realised his dream, and devoted himself to working the land."



*Figure 2 Leons's tombstone in Rishpon, Israel*

English translation:

Eliezer  
son of Meir and Gila  
Hodes  
Born in 1893  
Passed away on November 25, '63 (likely 1963)  
9 Kislev 5724  
After 57 years in exile [in the diaspora]  
he fulfilled his dream and devoted himself  
to working the land

## CHAPTER 1

Just by looking at the appearance of my face, it is difficult to tell my country of origin<sup>3</sup>. Considering that these memoirs are being written on a homestead in Israel<sup>4</sup> in 1963, most likely I am Jewish. But, as you will see, I consider myself an international man, and my story is that of the anonymous face of mankind. I feel in my bones that I carry a message for the world.

Seeing me here, sitting at my kitchen table, you might suppose me to be a rather unkempt and dirty old geezer. But appearances can be deceptive. My shirt may be stained, and my khaki work trousers may be torn. However, I am perfectly comfortable and at ease. My wife<sup>5</sup> is out visiting friends, attending the theatre or playing rummy and I have the evening off. When the cat is away, the mouse will play!

Perhaps that isn't a good metaphor for this moshav life! My wife is really very modern, smart and up-to-date, and she keeps me up to the mark. I love my wife, and she loves me too, although we are as different from each other as my dirty shirt is from the smart clothes she wears. One husband is more than sufficient for her - but in food, clothes, friends, recreation, she insists on variety.

When my wife is here, I make sure to go straight to the bathroom on returning from my work in the fields. I wash up thoroughly, shave my stubble, brush my hair properly, and dress most respectably. But when my wife goes out for the evening, I indulge my hankering for a free and Bohemian lifestyle. I sit in soiled old clothes, eat in the kitchen instead of in the dining-room, let everything get into an irresponsible mess, and imagine that I am a creative writer.

When I was a youngster my constant wish and hope was to become a writer one day. I had a flair for writing, and my essays in school were the best written in all the classes, I was honoured and singled out by the teachers, who found my compositions so exceptional that they read them aloud to the other students as examples of fine writing. I also used to enter essays in competition with other children in the newspapers, and won several first prizes. When I left school, however, I never found the time or peace of mind that an author needs in order to write successfully. Writing was clearly a dubious source of income, so I drifted away from literature. I retained my ability to write letters, both private and business. My love-letters were outstanding real masterpieces! They had a great influence on both my wives, helping each of them in their decision to marry me.

As a matter of fact, all my children have inherited the writing bug. However, they are not really interested in recording my life story, so I have to put it down on paper for myself. I am already nearing my biblical three score and ten years, so if I don't tell my story it may be too late. I am now semi-retired, running my small meshek (farm) in this moshav in Israel for some ten to twelve hours a day in order to keep myself fit, active and healthy. I have sufficient income from my other interests to live on. At work in my fields I relive the events of my life. It has been strange and interesting in many

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<sup>3</sup> Latvia

<sup>4</sup> Moshav Rishpon the Central District of Israel. Located in the Sharon plain near Herzliya

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Hodes (Nee Rabinowitz) 1895 - 1975

aspects. Some of my thoughts, opinions and experiences seem to me original enough to possibly interest the reader.

Last night I dreamed of many things. Most I cannot remember you know how dreams vanish! But one dream I recollect vividly and clearly. I was driving in a car and took a side road to the foot of a mountain. When the car stopped, I got out and sat down on the grass to rest. Then I saw great heaps of gold coins scattered all over the ground, and began loading them into the car. It was impossible to pick them all up the more I tried, the more there were. Finally, I remember a loud voice shouting at me "Enough!"

"Leave off now," the voice said, more gently. "Money is like water. Just imagine that you are thirsty, you will drink as much as you can, but will leave the rest of the water in the stream. So it is with money!" I suppose there could be many different interpretations of that dream. Personally, I take dreams simply at their face value. Perhaps I was discovering, even in my sleep, that wealth has its limitations. I cannot say that I am what is called a wealthy man, although nobody can say that I am poor or that I have been a

failure.

Yet my story, which you are about to read, begins with a happy ending. Not everyone can look back on a long and sometimes stormy life, and realise that he has finally come home to a safe harbour. I am so content to be living here with my dear wife Rachel, in our own land of Israel, with my daughters Gillian and Harriet and their children, all close by. If the story of a simple man like me ends in everyone being happy, surely there must be a meaning to my life which can help other men to find contentment. What's my own secret? And if this story begins with this happy ending, with what sort of beginning will it end?

## CHAPTER II

I came into the world in the last decade of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. It was an age with no wireless, no cinema, no motorcars. Yet somehow, even in the remote villages in Czarist Russia, near the big city of Riga in what used to be Latvia, we knew that it was a time when Man was advancing in commerce, industry and science. I do not remember my father<sup>7</sup> at all from my early childhood days. I was only three years old<sup>8</sup> when he emigrated from Russia to the United Kingdom. In fact, I suppose that I was the last child born in our family,<sup>9</sup> only because my father left before he could bring some more blessings to his house. He was the first to leave, going to Britain with two of my sisters<sup>10</sup>. Later on, we went over in twos and threes to join him. Eventually, my mother<sup>11</sup> made the last trip with my remaining sister, two brothers and myself<sup>12</sup>. So I have not the faintest recollection of ever having seen my father before the rearguard of the Hodes army went to join the others in the new land. My father had come from a fine family, originally rich and cultured, who had left him an ironmonger's shop as an inheritance. He was a thorough gentleman, with an extremely kind heart, but with no business acumen whatsoever.

There was no reason for me to be born at all, other than ignorance of contraception on the part of my parents. Nor did I ask to be brought into the world. There were too many children in the house already I was the thirteenth<sup>13</sup> born to my mother (although one had died before my birth)<sup>14</sup>. Not being superstitious at all, I do not consider it either lucky or unlucky to be a thirteenth child. I have felt at times that it was somewhat excessive on the part of my parents. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened to me if my parents had known as much about family planning as my wife and I they would certainly have done something to enable the world to get along without me! They had enough mouths to feed and enough bodies to clothe from their paltry earnings.

In those days, circumstances were different. People looked on the sky as the limit as far as the number of children was concerned. They thought that even four was small for a family. Queen Victoria set the example with her twelve children; they all turned out well, naturally, becoming titled lords and ladies.

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Hodes was born on 26 August 1893 in Frauenburg, Latvia. It is nowadays known as Saldus and is in the Courland region, 119 km from the capital Riga

<sup>7</sup> Meyer Hodes (1842 – 1928). Meyer (Mendel) was born in Pikeliai, Lithuania but moved to Frauenberg in 1876 when he married his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, Gella Dora (Deborah) Luntz (1856 – 1912)

<sup>8</sup> Late 1896 or early 1897

<sup>9</sup> None of the children's birth certificates have been located, so their dates of birth have had to be pieced together from other sources. These sources have Leon as older than his brother Benjamin and sister Annie! These discrepancies will probably only be resolved if and when someday the birth certificates are uncovered in the Latvian archives and made available online

<sup>10</sup> The eldest sister was Sarah Frieda, born in 1877, followed by Hannah born in 1881

<sup>11</sup> Gella Dora (Deborah) Hodes (Nee Luntz) (1856 – 1912)

<sup>12</sup> The remaining sister would have been Annie, born in 1895 and the other two boys would have been Benjamin, born 1895 and Louis born 1892

<sup>13</sup> The 13 children were, in order of birth as I have them; Sarah, Hannah, Minnie, Amelia (Mollie), Rose, William, Jane, Matilda (Tilly), Dorothy, Louis, Leon, Annie, Benjamin and Dorothy)

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Hodes



Even if my parents had understood contraception, I doubt whether they would have had the means to pay for it. They found it cheaper to have the children! When I pushed my way into this world there was practically no expense. Clothes and perambulator passed from child to child. The so-called midwife was free. The food I received for the first year of my life did not cost a single penny. Whatever my two daughters' views on breastfeeding versus bottle-feeding, there was no controversy about what I was to consume in my first year of life.

In those days, too, religion encouraged a high birth rate. My parents believed in the precept: "Be fruitful and multiply: the Lord will provide". They thought of the coming child as an added joy rather than an expense. Of course, nowadays there are also many other pleasures and distractions to keep couples out of parenthood. Some people do not want children at all they would just as soon devote themselves to dogs or cats or even automobiles!

How many great men or even ordinary men, for that matter have not been born because of new attitudes regarding family size? The poet writes of "some mute, inglorious Milton"<sup>15</sup> lying in the village graveyard; how many potential Miltons have been denied their chance to exist?

Man claims to have been created superior to animals and to all other species of life. Man was given the use of hands, the powers of speech and thought. In his compact brain-box are stored so many treasures. According to the Psalmist, he is only a little lower than the angels. Yet it is very disappointing to find that this near-angel has needs and instincts which place him on the same level as the animals. Eating, sleeping and lusting, we are a long way from being angelic. Greed, rage and jealousy in Man can exceed similar drives in beasts. Even Shakespeare, though he spoke with the tongue of angels, had to season his speech with the vernacular of the vulgar. The Bible itself has its share of sexually oriented stories. There is nothing puritanical about David peeping at Bathsheba in the bath, and the Song of Songs was clearly not written by a nineteenth century clergyman.

Despite what I have said about animals and angels, do not think me irreligious. No simple man is that, any more than he is a fanatic. The word "God" seems to me to be inadequate and meaningless. A better word is "Creator", or, as some philosophers and scientists call Him, just plain Nature. It is obvious to me that there had to be a Creator of the world, and that Nature is His agent. I believe that He does take an interest in Man's existence and welfare, although I do not hold Him responsible for each individual's troubles. He reveals Himself through His chosen agents in the disclosure of His own secrets, such as electricity and the splitting of the atom at a time of His choosing.

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<sup>15</sup> Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray

### CHAPTER III

Back in Czarist Russia<sup>16</sup> we were desperately poor, but I cannot remember that it worried us children in any way. We ate our bellyful of good plain country food and wore what humble clothes we had. We were never "low-class" poor, like some slum-dwellers I've seen since in other parts of the world. We always kept our respectability.

In the summertime we ran around barefoot, playing games with buttons and pebbles for toys. We fished in the rivers with home-made nets, making crude hooks out of bent pins from our mother's sewing-box. We did not know that we were less privileged than the other children in our world, because we were all equally poor. The basic foods of grains, vegetables and chickens were cheap and plentiful. Nobody in our village knew what was meant by a luxury item, so we did not know that we were missing anything.

For extras, our mother relied on our wits. We caught fish in the many streams and gathered wild berries from the forest. The strawberries were amazing! I sometimes wonder whether there are strawberries anywhere in the world to equal those which grew wild in Russia. Their size, their colour, their taste, the way they burst so sweetly in the mouth! Those were strawberries! Sometimes we even stole fruit from the farmers' trees. Of course, we didn't really call it "stealing"; if it was, we would have lost our priceless respectability. In fact, the fruit "stealing" ended one day when we were caught in an apple orchard and the farmer took all our clothes! We had to run home crying, stark naked, and my mother had to go to the farmer to beg him to give our clothes back. After she found out about the trips to the orchard, she put a stop to our adding to the table without the owner's permission. It could no longer be considered just collecting apples off trees the way we found the berries in the woods. It was plain theft, and that she forbade.

Only now, when I stir my memory, do I realise how much pain and sorrow our mother must have suffered in rearing us. Our father, when he emigrated to the United Kingdom, had left her in charge of the ironmongery shop that had been given to him by his family when he married<sup>17</sup>. In addition to looking after the house and children, our mother ran the shop. I remember her sitting there, on a cold winter's day, waiting for a peasant to come in to make a purchase. It was a large shop, but empty. I suppose that in better days, before those that I can remember, the shelves must have been full of goods. But in my recollection they were half-full or even less. There was a sort of one-way traffic, with goods going slowly out but none coming in the poor woman had no funds to replace her stock! All the money she took in went to keep the family alive. I can still see her lined face as she sat huddled over a feeble

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<sup>16</sup> Latvia was part of Russia until 1918

<sup>17</sup> According to David Elyan this shop was actually in Šiauliai, Lithuania — "As a child in Cork, my grandmother Sarah Elyan told me that her family had a hardware shop in Shavl and, as the eldest of 13, she sometimes used to work in it. I was especially interested that they sold ice skates! Last Autumn I happened to visit Shiauliai (formerly Shavl) and found that there was a large lake near the city which still ices over in cold weather." But as Leon was born and grew up in Frauenburg it remains unclear, unless they first operated the shop in Shavl and then relocated to Frauenburg

stove during those bitter winters, and I realise how much she must have suffered during those years when she waited for the word and the money to leave Russia.

However, after our mother closed the shop for the day, and went upstairs to the living-room, she became a person transformed. Her face took on a completely different expression. She was as happy as a hen with its chickens! At certain times there would be a little extra money from our father, now in faraway Scotland; then our mother would go on a little spending spree and purchase some special items for the family, like meat. And when Shabbat came round, and she put on her best clothes and what little jewellery she had, she looked to us like the Empress of all the Russians!

Most of the people in the town were in much the same position. Fathers or elder brothers had gone to America or England or South Africa, sending home a trickle of money. As more and more made the trip to these promised lands, the towns and villages slowly emptied.

Every family had a sum of twenty pounds sterling shuttling backwards and forwards. At that time there were no barriers against immigration into England or other countries except on the grounds of ill-health. In case the health authorities should refuse admission for this reason, the shipping companies insisted that each passenger should deposit twenty pounds to cover the cost of his return. On admission to the new country, he collected his money and sent it at once to Russia, to be used as a deposit by the next emigrant in the family.

As time went by, the money coming from abroad to our town increased. The emigrants became senders, while the volume of internal business decreased. Life in the town became a little fuller, and even more pleasant, because of the pennies sent by the peddlers and milliners abroad. However, people also became covetous, jealous and ostentatious. Although families were anxious to get out to rejoin the remote heads of their households, this took much time and money. Meanwhile, over the years the town steadily became depleted. But those remaining were better off, and able to put on airs and graces.

All this time we children played out in the open air and enjoyed the natural life we led. We grew up tough and self-reliant the hard way, with sharpened wits and resourceful spirits. Sometimes I compare ourselves then to the children of today, with everything laid on and planned for them, and I wonder how they are going to stand up for themselves in this rough world. But perhaps I'm just a sourpuss who would like his children to be independent of the old man!

What was my education? The woods, the fields, our poverty and the Bible. We were taught the Bible thoroughly, but nothing else, and we never questioned the passages we had to learn by heart.

Certainly I never understood the innumerable references to sex: "he went in unto her", "she conceived", the stories about Sodom and the daughters of Lot. Nobody ever explained the functions of sex to me? I picked up my knowledge of sex (as well as everything else) the hard way. By the time I was nine, when our turn eventually came to make the great trip to Scotland, I was still a Biblical barbarian. I was picking

wild strawberries in the forests, swimming in the rivers, eating plain coarse meals, and was in no way the worse for lack of anything better, as far as I knew. I hardly understood that there was a wider world outside our village, although I suppose that I knew my father and sisters and brothers were somewhere out there in a mystical place called Scotland. I had no education whatsoever apart from that given to me by the Rabbi.

I remember an incident from my cheder days. When I was a child and went to school for the first time, the old Rabbi who taught us said that God would send sweets raining down from Heaven if we learned our lessons well. I memorised that lesson like nothing I've ever struggled with since. When I recited it, the Rabbi stood behind me and sure enough, sweets poured down onto my table! I don't know when I stopped believing that it had been a miracle!

We didn't know it then, of course, but we were living through the period of the collapse of the Russian Empire. Since then I have studied history, and know that powerful societies always go under when a small minority lives a selfish lifestyle at the expense of others. The ruling classes of Russia did not give a damn about the welfare of the people. They were just like the aristocracy before the French Revolution. Our people must have sensed that Russia was a good country to get out of, before the storm burst. Where the townspeople finally ended up often depended on the urgency and the funds available. Most desirable of all the destinations was America. But the nearest and cheapest country was the United Kingdom. So my own family emigrated to Scotland to join our father.

Eventually that wild day came when we received our tickets and travel documents. The days that followed were the most hectic that I can remember. First of all, mother was busy making new clothes for all of us. My entire wardrobe for that momentous trip was tailored; not only suits but right down to caps, shirts, vests and stockings anything and everything. There was no going round to a store and buying readymade clothes mother just bought material and fitted us all out. Our clothes were made to measure because there were no other clothes to be had.

This was the first time I had ever worn brand new clothes of my very own, instead of the castoffs of my older brothers and sisters. Perhaps that is why I sometimes trace my wistful longing for the Bohemian habits my wife detests so much to the care-free existence I led as a young boy. I never understood that poverty at the time; the truth is that I never knew how miserable I was supposed to feel.

We were allowed to take only a few articles with us, such as heirlooms and things of sentimental value. My mother tried to sell what remained of our meagre possessions, but our goods and clothes were so dilapidated that the scrap dealers would not pay her more than a pittance, even after long haggling and bargaining. Anything that remained undisposed of, not even the poorest villagers would accept as a gift. We had to throw away the fragments of our lives onto the rubbish heaps.

Trunks or suitcases were unknown in those days in our village we wrapped everything in sheets and blankets and bound the bundles with ropes. The number of bundles was limited by the size of the cart which was to enable us to leave the land

of our birth. Although the children hardly understood all the activity, we were wild with excitement. We had never been outside the limits of our village before, and had no knowledge of strangers.

Our remaining friends came to say goodbye. There was much weeping and shedding of tears, both of grief and of joy. I remember my own sorrow as I was parted from my pet cat and dog. Otherwise I grew steadily more and more excited and suddenly became conscious of the limitless world outside.

When we left the village with our belongings, it was our first experience of having a long drive in a cart, let alone one drawn by two enormous horses. We looked back at our familiar fields, pastures and forests, until they blurred in the darkness and we fell asleep, waking only at midnight when we arrived at a railway Junction. The first sight of the train that strange steel monster with its eerie smoke, weird noises and flashing lights almost drove me crazy with bewilderment and excitement. The train took us to a seaport on the coast of the Baltic Sea, where we finally boarded our ship.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This would have been sometime in 1901 or perhaps early 1902

## CHAPTER IV

The ship that was to carry us to the new land had no cabins or dining saloons. There were only "open berths", bunks on the deck where men, women and children were all herded together. There was no such thing as privacy. Later I read that there was a shipping war for immigrants like ourselves; at one time the price for such passengers went down to two pounds a head for a journey from Ireland to the United States.

On the boat, the noise and tumult were fantastic. Men were praying, children crying, mothers scolding. People were singing or playing card games or musical instruments, all using a Babel of Eastern European languages. The food was very basic: bread, gruel and water. Everyone had to queue up for food; if you happened to be hungry afterwards, you had to fight your way back in to the line for a second helping.

The journey to London took three days. The British customs officials knew how to handle our type of raw immigrant. We were told, through interpreters, "Open for inspection all bundles except those containing liquor or dutiable items!" Then they examined only the unopened packages!

From the docks we travelled by open cart standing room only - to the house of one of my aunts<sup>19</sup>. My father had not been able to pay for the trip to Glasgow, in Scotland, where we were to meet. Our cart was great fun at the time. But later, whenever I saw pictures of aristocrats on tumbrils in the French Revolution, I was reminded of our journey through London. Some parts of that first trip I remember vividly. Our mother was frantically anxious when she saw her first London bobby. She wanted to stop the cart so that we could run away and hide! Back home in Russia, of course, the police had been terrifying enemies. My aunt laughed merrily and tried to explain to the poor woman that the police in England were different. Sometime later a Salvation Army band came down the street, followed by a crowd of people. My mother thought that this religious procession too, like the ones in Russia, spelled trouble for the Jews! Ever afterwards I had a great thrill following the Salvation Army as they marched, knowing that it was safe to do so.

The Salvation Army band was perhaps one of the chief symbols of my childhood in Britain, just as the wild strawberries are the remembered delight of Russia. Those Salvation Army lads and lassies never understood why they made such a hit with us immigrant children. Perhaps they thought that we were potential converts! Of course we would never be, but theirs was the first procession which we had ever been allowed to join. Their uniforms were no threat to us, and the bobbies that accompanied them were so friendly.

We could not believe that the people in the street were ordinary human beings. We were intrigued by their strange clothes bowler hats, rolled umbrellas, collars and ties

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<sup>19</sup> I suspect this aunt was Sheina Frumkin (Nee Hodes) (1845 – 1925). She was Meyer's sister and her and her husband Arye Leib Frumkin operated a wine shop (L Frumkin and Company – wine merchants) in London. In the 1901 census one of Leon's older sisters, Hannah, is listed as living there. Sheina and Arye Leib arrived in London from Palestine in 1893. The shop, selling Kosher wine, opened in 1894 on the corner of Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road, in the heart of the East End. The address was 164 Commercial Road.

as well as their shops and their noisy vehicles. They looked to us as men from Mars would to children today. When we reached my aunt's house in the East End of London, we were ravenously hungry. Instead of real food, however, she wanted to serve us the strangest commodities, that we had never laid eyes on before. We later found out that they were oranges, bananas, and various jellies. Mother was terrified of the possible effect of these outlandish items on our delicate stomachs, and warned us not to eat too much! We were real "greeners", as new immigrants were called. We spent a few hectic days in London. Numerous friends, relatives and landsleit<sup>20</sup> came to visit. But my mother knew that her husband was waiting impatiently for his wife and children, so she decided to cut short the festivities and proceed to our journey's end in Glasgow, Scotland.

We could not afford to travel by train, not even in a third-class carriage as most people in our situation would have done. During all our years of poverty in Russia, one principle had been instilled in me: always find the cheapest way of doing something, however inconvenient and difficult it might turn out. Naturally, if one could wangle something for free, so much the better! So my mother decided that we should travel by boat, which was much cheaper than the train, although of course a voyage by tramp steamer would take far longer than a train journey. However, we had time enough to spare.

Our tramp steamer had cabins; after our previous voyage, this seemed to us like Paradise. We roamed all over the ship until we knew each nook and cranny, watching the sea go past. The food, by comparison, was wonderful. But the next day brought a great change to the ship and to its passengers. The wind moaned, the sea and our stomachs heaved. The cabin became a shambles of wrecked furniture, wretched belongings and meals returned undigested by protesting shtetl stomachs.

My one sister and I seemed to be the least affected by sea-sickness. We comforted the others by reading them the story of Jonah; we all prayed to the Lord to bring us back safely from the belly of the ocean. I don't know whether any of the other's really believed that the Lord had helped Jonah, but prayer was the only antidote to misfortune which we had ever been taught.

Somehow the storm eventually abated, probably not altogether due to our prayers, since all this time I could talk no English apart from "Yes" and "All right". If I needed anything I had to rely on my hands or a contortion of my face to speak for me. Years later I was to see Charlie Chaplin on the silent screen he always reminded me of my early efforts to speak English, with his miming actions and variety of expression.

We heaved and tossed our way up the Irish sea. Ultimately our ship arrived at the port of Greenock at the mouth of the Clyde River. A kindly ship's officer put us on a train and after a short ride we came to Glasgow to meet my father.

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<sup>20</sup> Yiddish for a person from the same town or geographical area

## CHAPTER V

I must be one of the few men in this world who has needed to be formally introduced to his own father! I have a vivid memory of my mother coming down the gangplank at Greenock, embracing this imposing stranger, this venerable man with a long beard, and then telling me he was my father.

We were bundled into a tram, and found ourselves eventually in our home, an upstairs tenement in one of the most depressed of the slums, the Gorbals<sup>21</sup>. I do not suppose that my father could have found anything cheaper, however hard he tried. I was too young then to comprehend how bad were the drunkenness, the sordidness, the rowdiness, the ragged and barefoot children, the defeated women with threadbare shawls around their shoulder's, the sullen men who always seemed to be staggering around, half-drunk. Shouting and quarrelling went on in every pub, and there were invariably four at every intersection, one on each corner.

We were to live in these surroundings for years, much as - years later my own children were to grow up accustomed to fresh air, green fields and clear skies. We did not realise the significance of the squalor; it did not disturb our re-union in any way. We lived at peace with our rowdy Christian neighbours - in fact, we were treated with respect, as People of the Book. Our lives took new roots and flourished. We never grumbled or complained or queried the fact that we were perpetually short of money.

I remember my father in Glasgow, trudging around with framed pictures of Queen Victoria and the Pope. He used to sell photograph and frames for six shillings payable at a shilling a week. The pictures cost him a shilling each. "There's profit for you!" he used to declare, "Six hundred percent!" He carried six pictures on each shoulder. Surely everybody in Scotland wanted a picture of one or the other, the great Queen or the great Pope? He calculated that he was certain to make maximum sales. He couldn't believe that the working-man's wife could resist such a choice.

However, the profit margin did not make up for abysmal turnover, and the poor man never made good. In fact, if my sisters had not worked as milliners, stitching away at ladies' hats with their nimble fingers almost from the day they came to Scotland, none of the rest of us would have escaped from Russia.

Life in the slums of Glasgow was warm and intimate. By day the men worked and the children were at school. At night the tenements and streets came alive with bustling crowds. Saturday night was an occasion for much carousing, with the police frequently arriving in their "Black Maria" to take the merry-makers away.

The Hodes family led plain and simple lives. We had nothing to do with the people around us, and retained our basic respectability. We kept to ourselves, associating only with other Jewish families. We visited each other's tenements, and while our parents discussed religious or business matters, the women gossiped and the children played. Our main social centre was the synagogue, just as it had been in Russia. But we felt free. It was a freedom we had never known in the old country.

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<sup>21</sup> I have been unable to track the family in the 1901 Scottish census



The Scots were a fine people, completely different to the Russians we had known they were religious, tolerant, and sympathetic. They were glad to give asylum to us, the Chosen People of the Book, who had escaped from oppression as the Israelites had from Egypt. Most of the week we ate only the basic foods, which were cheap but on Friday and Saturday nights we lived like kings! On Friday night we welcomed Queen Sabbath with an extravagant meal of gefilte fish, chicken, stewed fruits, baked apples, cakes and tarts. On Saturday nights we went out on great shopping sprees, purchasing titbits, dainties and knick-knacks as special treats. Our large family would come home to our little tenement looking like a laden caravan.

Gradually, things began to look up for us. You could even say that business was brisk! My brothers were apprenticed and brought home what they could. My sisters were all working as milliners. Everybody contributed their earnings to the common pool. The bank was a large red tea tin unlocked, but put away in a safe place, with our mother serving as the treasurer. As our situation improved, the dilapidated pieces of furniture were gradually replaced. Then came new curtains and later on new kitchen utensils.

My first days in a school<sup>22</sup> in Glasgow are still vivid to me. Although I was nine years old, I was put into the "baby class" with children of five, because I did not know enough English. Within a week I was able to master the vowels and consonants, and catch up to the others. My religious education in Russia, although the equivalent of Grade 4 or 5, only qualified me to know the entire Old Testament. I could recite long portions of the Law by heart, but all that was of no help to me. With my peculiar speech and behaviour, I must have seemed very strange to those little Scottish children, starting to learn the ABC with them.

I rose quickly from the beginners' class to one in which the other children were my contemporaries. But the chief lesson I was learning all the time was how to obtain things without spending money. Cheapness was the main objective; getting something for nothing was the ultimate dream. Our games cost nothing. To read we went to the public libraries for the leading newspapers, magazines and books even the magnificent and expensive Encyclopaedia Britannica. We went to the museums to see the wonders of nature and of art. We heard music played by the municipal symphony orchestra, and listened to public speeches by great men. And all for nothing!

Living without spending can be an art, requiring great patience and skill. We learned to walk instead of taking a bus, to borrow instead of buying. Despite the extremes to which we were forced we always managed to maintain our decency and respectability. There was one luxury for which, however, we paid in cash although not much. For three pence we could have a luxurious steaming hot bath, provided by the Glasgow Municipality. Amid all the squalor and vice and drunkenness, we remained an island of propriety. And even in the worst slums, the people preserved their unique British spirit of fair play. Fights had to be conducted in the proper manner and bullies were not tolerated.

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<sup>22</sup> Adelphi School Adelphi school on Rose (now Florence) Street, Gorbals, Glasgow, Scotland

Poverty and want can bring out the best in people as well as the worst, while riches and comfort often corrupt and cause decadence. Members of the younger generation complain that I continually stress frugality and thrift to the point of being boring. To them I quote Dickens' Mr. Micawber, who said, in effect, that if you spend less than you earn, you are happy, but if you spend more than you earn, you are miserable.

But we needed money to live, and it was necessary for me to go to work in the afternoons. After school I used to go out on the streets of Glasgow and try to sell sheet music to the public. It was a hard life, but I remember it with affection. Most of the Jews who immigrated to Scotland engaged in petty trading and hawking of all sorts of small articles old clothes, bags, boxes or they would work in dark stuffy "sweat shops" making articles of clothing. We all lived in the poorest way possible, saving every penny. Nobody minded or resented us. We had no assets other than our wits and our respectability. Those were the days when Free Trade was holy and everyone was free to buy in the cheapest market and to sell in the highest. Nobody begrudged my father his ambition to corner the market in pictures of the Queen and the Pope.

In another of my father's business ventures, he had decided to become a coffee merchant. Perhaps he saw himself as another Lipton. He bought himself a coffee-grinding machine and we floated a company of three father was the managing director, mother was in charge of production, and I was the sales force. I made my rounds before and after school. Putting my heart and soul into my work, I tried every trick of super-salesmanship. What must those Scots housewives have thought of that ragged boy, unable to talk the language properly, trying to persuade them to purchase a packet of coffee without a recognisable label? Needless to say, the distribution end of the business broke down and Hodes' Coffee never achieved the fame of Lipton's Tea. This first major setback in business caused me much despair and suffering, for I imagined that I had let my father down in his greatest enterprise!

When Passover came round, we were too poor to buy me a new suit: so I missed school to go out selling sheet music, in both the morning and the afternoon. I tramped around for hours. It seemed, however, that no woman in the whole of Scotland was in the least interested in studying music; not a single housewife had so much as one threepenny bit for one of my sheets. Around midday, tired and hungry, I stood on a corner in the gutter and prayed to God with all the passion of my soul, asking Him to help me get that suit for Passover. I even reminded Him of that episode with the sweets back in my cheder in Russia! Maybe He was on the side of the school inspectors, but He did not help me to make a single sale, despite the tearful prayers. I cried all the way home, and wanted to spend Passover in bed, pretending to be sick. But my father wouldn't hear of that. I had to go to the synagogue in my usual clothes, and suffer all the torments of a boy's humiliation. Around that time I decided that poverty was one sin I was going to avoid for all time. My father was like Dickens' Micawber devoted to his children, but no breadwinner. We suffered from his inefficiency as much as if he had been a scoundrel. He offered us the satisfaction of religion when we were barefoot and hungry. I made up my mind then that my children would never bear poverty as a condition for spiritual grace.

I reached Standard Six by the time I was fourteen and then I had to leave school. There was no chance of my continuing into Secondary School. That ever-present enemy, economy, demanded that I go to work full-time to contribute my portion to the family tin. Nevertheless, I continued with evening classes, which had the virtue of being free. In this way I learned bookkeeping, business methods, shorthand, literature. These evening courses, together with the public institutions of libraries, art galleries, lectures and concerts enabled me to educate myself and make myself as cultured a man as possible.

Throughout all my time in Scotland, while I was busy with work and self-education, I had nothing to do with girls. I had neither the money nor the incentive! Nowadays, in many books about slum life, it seems as if the characters start making love from childhood. Our house was never like that at all! On the contrary, we always preserved our modesty and even our ignorance. It's true that we all shared a room, children of both sexes, but by means of screens we obeyed the Biblical injunction to never uncover our nakedness. In the kitchen we had a big double bed, but that did not mean that we had no privacy. As I have said earlier, the Hodes family was always very respectable.

Eventually, of course, I must have acquired curiosity about, if not some interest in, the opposite sex. Not receiving instruction from my parents, I found out what I wanted to know by going to the Glasgow Public Library and looking up the basics of the subject in encyclopaedias. From the Bible I had learned about the various forms love can take. In countless classic stories in the Bible we read of the love of man for his God; the love of a man for his wife and children; the love of work, of nature, and of pleasure in food, in music, in art. But the mechanics of the sexual act and the miracle of reproduction are not detailed in the Bible, although it does not shy away from tales of infidelity and even of rape, and expresses the writer's wonder at the way of a man with a maid.

Nowadays, modern novelists find they have to describe in detail the uninhibited sexual behaviour of their characters, in order to titillate their readers. But I have to confess that these excesses of passion were unknown to me. The virtues of affection, honour, duty, charity and good humour were always part of my nature, but not fevered and uncontrolled desire. Sentiment always seemed to me a sign of weakness. Perhaps it was my harsh upbringing!

In any event, I passed my boyhood years without sexual problems. I knew that brothels existed, but did not visit them. I lived as hundreds of young men like myself did. We did not know what we were missing. We waited until marriage, and then were faithful to our wives.

## CHAPTER VI

When I left school my teachers suggested to me and my family that I should enter the civil service. This sounded attractive, but my parents and my religious beliefs would not allow me to take on any position which involved working on the Sabbath. So I was limited to finding a job with one of those few Jewish firms which kept closed on the Jewish Holy Days and on Saturdays.

With this aim, I obtained the post of office boy with a wholesale firm, Jewish owned, which closed on the Sabbath. Due to this condition of my employment, England was saved from yet another bureaucrat! Although I was free on weekends, the work during the rest of the week was very strenuous. It involved sweeping floors, running errands and delivering heavy packages. In fact, my brother who had started off in the same place some years before me - had found the work beyond his strength. He had complained to our father, who promptly marched off to confront the boss and remonstrated with him. "How can you, a good Jewish man, treat my poor boy so badly? You are worse than the slave drivers in Egypt!"

But the boss interrupted him: "My dear man, this is a free country he's not forced to work here! In fact, I'll pay him off right now. Good morning!"

So my brother left, but despite my father's misgivings I went to work for this man, who my gentle parent thought was an inhuman monster. Perhaps I decided to work for him precisely because of his reputation. Being of a more determined and persevering nature, I cannot resist a challenge and like to prove that nothing is impossible. My starting salary was five shillings a week.

It would be a lie to say that I did not suffer from the physical strain of the work. I remember asking my mother one night whether everyone suffered as I did from tired and aching feet. "Oh, no, my child," she answered, "But you will get used to it in time."

Eventually I became accustomed to the exhaustion, but I certainly do not remember that position with anything but distress. Despite the gruelling work, I nevertheless endeavoured to always be a most polite and obliging youngster, so much so that after six months I fully expected a raise. None came, so I plucked up courage, confronted the boss with echoes of *Oliver Twist*, and asked for it. "Please, sir," I said, "I would like an increase to six shillings-"

"What impudence!" roared the boss. "You are getting more than enough! We can get plenty of youngsters like you!"

Terribly stricken by this miserable reward for my efforts and dedication, I quit as soon as I could and found another job. This turned out to be a much easier one an office boy with a wholesale merchant and here I discovered that I had a good head for business.

One of my tasks was to clean out the store each day of all the packing materials, such as paper, hessian, string and cardboard. I found an unused basement and started to collect all the rubbish

instead of throwing it away. After some months the basement was piled roof-high with my accumulated paper, sacking and cardboard. I went to one of the firms that bought up such rubbish and sold them the lot. The boss normally arrived at ten a.m., so I ordered the rubbish removers for eight.

Unluckily for me, they arrived late, and the removal took longer than anticipated. My boss arrived in the middle of the great operation. I can still remember the look on his face when he saw that van outside the store, and men trudging out with stacks and stacks of bundles. At first he thought that they were robbers, working in collusion with me. It took a long time to make him understand that there was nothing of value in the parcels that they were taking away.

Then he went with me to inspect my basement his basement, technically, but mine by right of use. He turned even paler than when he had discovered the removal squad.

"Just imagine if there had been a fire!" he cried, pulling at his hair. "I wouldn't have got a penny of insurance!" Then, after a while, he brightened up and started to laugh. "You'll make a businessman yet, Hodes!" he said, shaking his head, "That is, if you don't burn yourself in the process!" This kindly boss turned out to be so amused by my venture into the scrap business, that he gave me a more responsible position and a higher salary. Meanwhile, my brothers had emigrated to South Africa, and one of them wrote to me, offering to pay my passage. When the firm heard that I was thinking of leaving, they generously offered to double my salary. That meant that I would now be earning twenty-five shillings a week and I was only eighteen! "You can get married on that salary!" declared the boss. It was true: money was worth something in those days, and a man could support a wife and a brace of children handsomely on twenty-five shillings a week.

But I was restless for something else.

I stayed on for the best part of a year, but then decided to join my brother in South Africa<sup>23</sup>. Why did I want to give up my position, with all its bright prospects which even made marriage a possibility? My brother had offered me no particular inducement, other than the passage money and his descriptions of the country. Perhaps it was the spirit of adventure in me, that was to keep me on the go throughout my life.

So, after ten years in this hospitable Scottish city, I decided to leave<sup>24</sup>. The people of Glasgow had always been very kind to us. despite our poverty.

Some forty-five years later, I came back to England for my eldest son Lionel's wedding, to a girl from Liverpool<sup>25</sup>. I took the opportunity to revisit Glasgow and went at once to the old haunts of my childhood. The tenements and school buildings were unchanged. But the children seemed to be much fewer in number, and they now.

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<sup>23</sup> Both Louis and William migrated to South Africa. In the 1911 Scottish census Louis is listed and William isn't so it was most probably William that came to South Africa first and who paid for Leon's ticket

<sup>24</sup> Leon is not listed in the 1911 Scottish census taken on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1911, suggesting he may have already left for London and then South Africa before this date

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Levin, who married my father Lionel on 11 April 1956

wore shoes and decent clothing. I saw no old women in ragged shawls, and hardly any drunkenness. And I also noticed that, where there used to be pubs on all four corners of a street crossing, there were now only two. The other corners had been taken over by banking houses.

## CHAPTER VII

It is amusing to me now to look back on my preparations for my trip to South Africa. At the time, of course, they were very solemn and deliberate. It was arranged that I would purchase everything I needed for the trip in London; my brother-in-law there could buy everything for me wholesale.

I stayed in London for three days, paying sixteen shillings for a suit, six shillings for a pair of shoes, one shilling for a set of underwear. Those were the days, when money had some meaning! My proudest buy was a fine black bowler hat, costing only three shillings and nine pence, which made me look like a real Englishman. This smart accessory eventually ended its career being nailed against a wall, with a slit in its majestic dome, serving duty as a letter-box!

The fare to South Africa by intermediate steamer via open berth was ten pounds naturally, the cheapest possible. Fortunately for me there were so few passengers that they placed me in a cabin, at no extra charge. Most of my fellow-passengers were immigrants from Eastern Europe. They looked at me with the utmost respect; I was, of course, no longer a Russian Jew, but now a real Englishman! The combined capital of all the settlers on the boat could not have amounted to more than a hundred pounds. Our fares had been paid by family predecessors in South Africa, in addition to the inevitable "travelling twenty pounds" which went its rounds between Europe and South Africa just as it had done between Russia and England.

One passenger was so illiterate that he could not even write Yiddish, his own home language! There was to be a medical examination on arrival. In addition to this, an immigrant to South Africa had to pass a simple education test. He had to be able to write a sentence in a European language, or write his own name using the Latin alphabet. For twenty-two days we, the educated, laboured in shifts to teach him his name. He finally made it on the last day!

In preparation for my arrival, I brought with me on the boat an English-Afrikaans dictionary. From it I learnt the common everyday words of the language spoken by half the citizens of my new country. It was not too difficult, because the structure of Afrikaans was similar to that of Yiddish.

My first view of sunny South Africa was as we steamed into Cape Town, on a cold and misty dawn in 1912. As our boat came into the welcoming arms of Table Bay we were greeted by the spectacular sight of the famous flat-topped Table Mountain appearing through the morning clouds. I had planned to proceed around the Cape of Good Hope, and on to Port Elizabeth on the East coast. While the boat was discharging its cargo in Cape Town, I walked around this charming city and found much to interest me in its natural beauty and in the quaint blend of Cape Dutch architecture with modernity. Everywhere I travelled on foot, without spending any of my capital, and took care to be back at the boat in time for meals.

At Port Elizabeth I stayed overnight with a brother-in-law<sup>26</sup> who was in the business of trading in wool, mohair and skins. I was anxious to proceed to Johannesburg as quickly as possible, and asked him the cost of a train ticket. "First or Second Class?" he enquired.

"Why, neither," I answered with surprise, "Third Class, of course!". You see, in Scotland there had been only two classes First and Third and as far as I was concerned there was only one to be used.

My brother-in-law flew into a rage at my reply. He told me that I had no self-respect, and that I wanted to disgrace my family. Eventually we cleared up the misunderstanding. In South Africa there were three classes: first and second for whites only, and third for the natives.

I travelled second-class to Johannesburg, the business centre of the country since the discovery of gold and diamonds some twenty-five years earlier. The city was humming and feverish. Everybody was busy with something. The people rushed and hurried like frantic mice. It was quite different from placid old Glasgow. My contacts in Johannesburg were only with the Jews, most of whom were in business.

Now, when I say "in business", I mean that they were solidly involved in their businesses, literally day and night, Saturdays and Sundays included. If they were not actually engaged in business, they would discuss it at length. On Sundays they would visit each other, ostensibly to play cards but they always used the time to talk shop. In general, the Jews of Johannesburg mixed very little with the Gentile community of that city. In fact, people often stayed only with relations or with landsleit, friends who had come from the same village or town in Eastern Europe.

These Johannesburg Jews were not merely petty peddlers, like the immigrants to Glasgow. They were big traders, wholesalers, speculators, and shopkeepers. They walked around with large cheque books in their pockets and deals of all sizes in their heads.

Some of these Jewish traders lived as frugally as we had done in Scotland. Others had an extravagant way of living. All talked business all the time. The magic word which made this activity possible was CREDIT. That dominated every aspect of South African life. It seemed strange to me at first, but later I realised what a beneficent and wonderful power the credit system exerted in the development of the young country, and how much prosperity and happiness it created. The system worked miracles. It was like a modern assembly line. No cash was needed! Goods passed through a dozen hands, and all that was necessary was accurate bookkeeping. Credit applied to every aspect of life, and brought blessings to both

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<sup>26</sup> Leon's sister Jane (Jannie) was to marry Nathan Lurie (1886 – 1939) on 18 June 1913 but my understanding is that when Leon arrived in 1912 Jane had yet to come out to South Africa. Nathan was also Leon's 1<sup>st</sup> cousin as his mother, Rebecca Lurie (Nee Luntz), was Leon's mother's sister! From the 1929 Jewish yearbook: "Nathan, Produce Merchant. Born in Schaulen, Lithuania, in 1885. Educated in Lithuania and South Africa. Came to South Africa in 1903. Ex-President, Port Elizabeth Zionist Society; Committee, Port Elizabeth Hebrew School. Postal Address: P.O. Box 487, Port Elizabeth."



giver and receiver. Everyone became rich, although nobody knew where the wealth originated.

On the top floor of the credit structure were the banks. Underneath them came the financial houses, then the shippers in England, then a succession: local wholesalers, industrialists, traders, shopkeepers. At the bottom of the chain came the hawkers. Farmers sold their future harvests to buy their present needs. If a storekeeper bought his goods from a "support house", he could obtain unlimited credit, regardless of his balance sheet, with no date set for payment. The merchants borrowed their money from the banks.

Sometimes, for some reason, a man would be pressed for payment. In that case, his friends would rally round and help out with accommodation bills. It was the easiest thing in the world you sign for me, I sign for you. But all that was being brought into this economic system were a couple of signatures no goods, no value, no anything. And yet, somehow, those signatures to pieces of paper, without assets to back them, became transformed into a booming economy! It was amazing.

For those who were really down and out, there were the benevolent societies. These organisations worked on guarantees by friends. Every Jewish immigrant could somewhere and somehow find a signature that would transform him into a businessman. Some soared to the heights of commercial royalty from these humble beginnings. They became trading princes and wholesale emperors, and some even rose to become known as potato kings, maize kings, ostrich feather kings and wool kings!

## CHAPTER VIII

My brother<sup>27</sup>, while in Scotland, had been a rather indifferent apprentice in a furniture factory. Here, in Johannesburg, he had blossomed into a wholesaler in hardware. He had an original and unusual type of business, however. He had no capital, no stock, and no premises!

He had evolved a remarkable technique. Instead of taking on a job as a commercial traveller, he proposed to some "landsleit", friends from our village way back in Russia, that he would carry their lines. But he would not do this as a commercial traveller, working on commission. That would be beneath his dignity. He bought goods, subject to an extra large discount, and resold them on bills, which his suppliers took in payment. He was not making a fortune, but was doing a fair trade.

It was amazing to me to see how all these people were becoming such financial moguls. I was only nineteen, and too young to become one of them myself. I persuaded myself that I should crawl before I could walk. It seemed that I had responsibilities to the family back in Scotland. For years I did not show that initiative which I now consider to be one of my chief traits. Perhaps the years in Scotland had made me too cautious for the devil-may-care credit business activities of Johannesburg. At any rate, it took me seven long years, like those of Jacob waiting for Rachel, before I realised how absurd it was for me to waste my life as a mere employee.

In fairness to myself, it must be stated that I had arrived in Johannesburg with no more than a few shillings to my name. My first task was to keep alive until I found a job. I did not want to become a burden on my brother, so I evolved a way of living on one shilling a day. This was an application of the lessons I had learned both in Russia and in Scotland spending money - how to live without

I managed it by obtaining a free bed in an outside room of the house of an old lady, a friend of the family. I had coffee and rolls for breakfast (price sixpence) and rolls and coffee for lunch (same price). Every day I would meet my brother in the evening and allow him to buy me a three-course dinner, which cost him one shilling and sixpence. I had no other items of expenditure. I washed my clothes myself, and walked instead of using public transport. I did not smoke and entertained no girls. I read newspapers at the Johannesburg Public Library and indulged in no amusements other than looking for work or visiting friends or acquaintances. If, in these social visits I got some free food and tea or coffee, that was clear profit for me! When I wrote letters home to the family, I passed them casually to my brother to include with his, thus saving postage.

Sometimes, for entertainment, I went to the law courts to listen in on an interesting case. This was every bit as exciting as the theatre, and free to boot!

Of course, in those days there was very little family life. Most of my acquaintances were young and single, or else they were temporary bachelors, sending their families funds in dribs and drabs to bring them to the new country. Marriageable young ladies

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<sup>27</sup> I assume this is William Hodes

were in great demand. Competition was so keen that many a desperate would-be lover went overseas to find himself a bride. Nothing much was expected of me. I could live as frugally as I pleased, and no questions were asked.

This state of affairs went on for a month. Then I struck it lucky, with a job in a country store between Johannesburg and Pretoria. The business was a general store, plus butchery, mill and supplier of builders' materials - it sold everything a farmer could want. The boss seemed to me to be a pleasant man, one of those who made good after landing in the country without a penny. He told me that unfortunately he had too many employees to warrant giving me a job "all found", which was customary in those days. I would have to share a room with another clerk, and would have to pay my own way. But the salary would be twelve pounds, instead of the expected six, and I could buy all my needs at cost price at his store.

It was not all that magnificent an offer, but I was keen to do well. I taught myself the rudiments of cooking. It was stocktaking time, so we worked day and night. I was so anxious to make a good impression in my first job in South Africa that I devoted myself to it, body and soul.

At the end of the month the boss called me into the office. He handed me my pay and said, "Sorry we don't need you anymore!" I was horrified. I had put so much effort into this job. I argued and pleaded with him, but he was adamant, although he very magnanimously offered to give me a favourable reference.

While I packed up my bundle of wretched clothes, another clerk told me that I had been tricked into coming there. The boss had only needed me for the stocktaking, but knew that I would never have taken the post on his terms if I had realised that it was only temporary. Business can be ugly at times.

So it was back to my one shilling a day again. This lasted for some weeks, till a wholesaler told me of another job available. This was in a store out in the country, near Bethal. When I arrived at the station, two men were waiting to meet me in a cart. They were dirty, unshaven and uncouth. I climbed up into the cart and we set off. We travelled along for several miles, swaying and creaking behind the two mules. We passed very few homesteads or buildings on the way. Suddenly, one of them grunted: "We are nearly there." I looked around, but all I could see in the miles of empty bushveld around me was one small shack made of wood, with sheets of galvanised iron for a roof. I wondered fearfully was this to be my new home?

It appeared that this was the case. I must admit that right then I prayed for a miracle, to transport me back to my dear old Glasgow slum. The store bartered blankets, beads and enamel ware with the local farmers, in return for boxes of eggs and bags of maize (or mealies as that crop is called there). "Sit down," said one of my new bosses, with a wave of his hand. I looked around for a chair, but there was none to be seen. Miserably I perched myself on a paraffin tin. For a while we were all silent in our fatigue from the long ride. Then one of them said: "Well, let's have something to eat."

I wondered where the living quarters were. The store did not seem to have any other buildings attached. One of the bosses went behind the counter and brought out

knives, forks and enamel plates. He took a loaf of bread and some cold mutton from a kaffirpot in the corner, and spread the feast out on one of the boxes.

It did not look very appetising. But I had not had such a dainty upbringing and I was famished, so I had a good feed. When we had finished, the other boss switched on a paraffin lamp, let out a big yawn, and said: "Let's get some steep. We have to be up early in the morning."

Sleep, but where? They pulled down blankets from the shelf and laid them out on the floor. "Young man, you can sleep on the counter," they told me. "Take as many blankets as you need. Tomorrow we'll tell you about your work."

I fell asleep, wondering what sort of a mess I had landed myself in this time. In the morning I was woken up by the grim-faced employers, as refreshed as if I had slept in a palace bed.

I went outside the store and saw there a Cape trolley, a light sort of cart drawn by two mules. A middle-aged native was busy making coffee and boiling eggs over a wood fire. My bosses introduced him to me as Sixpence. Natives were (and still are) given names at random by the white people of South Africa, who call them after coins, or months, or days of the week, or simply John or Tom or Charlie, without bothering to learn their real names.

"You'll go with Sixpence to the kraals," said one of the bosses. "He'll do teas and teach you the trade. You'll barter goods for eggs, mealies and chickens." While we were eating breakfast, Sixpence piled the cart sky-high with blankets, beads, pots and pans, empty boxes and bags.

Then I climbed on to the cart. With a sweep of Sixpence's whip, I was started on my new road to riches. Within an hour we arrived at the first native kraal. The inhabitants came flocking out to the trolley, the women bringing baskets of eggs and paraffin tins full of mealies on their heads, the half-naked umfaans carrying chickens. I did not understand a word of the conversation, but after numerous clicks of the tongue between them and my Sixpence, business started. Everything was done by barter. There were no problems about fixing the rate of exchange. Our bags and boxes filled up nicely as our stock disappeared. When business was finished, we were both invited to share a mug of Kaffir beer, which I drank up on Sixpence's recommendation that it was clean and wholesome.

And so we went from kraal to kraal. At dusk Sixpence suggested that we rest overnight. He pulled down some of the blankets and spread them under the cart for me. When I asked for food, he boiled me six eggs very hard.

The bosses were pleased with the trade we did. It did not take me long to learn a few words in the local native language, enough to converse with my customers. In any case, I always had the capable Sixpence with me. The life was of course very dreary for an educated and respectable young man. The two men were illiterate and coarse, and there were no such things as newspapers or books available. I decided to stick it out until the coming Jewish New Year, when all the outlying Jewish stores would close up shop, and everyone would go into the big city of Johannesburg for services.

There was a slight hitch in this plan, caused by the illness of one of the mules, and I was forced to continue working through the New Year. However, by the Day of Atonement I had been paid off, and was on my way back to Johannesburg. The big city seemed to my lonely imagination a long-dreamed of metropolis.

By the time I arrived in the city, the fast had already begun. and all the Jewish cafes were closed. I went into the railway restaurant and had a hearty meal, trusting that the Lord would be occupied elsewhere or that He would understand the situation and forgive me.

I had money in my pocket from my job and did not need to return to all the rigour's associated with a shilling a day. I raised my standard of living slightly, and occasionally paid for my brother and myself at the cafe.

My next post was a general dealer's store in a small town in the Eastern Transvaal. I was assistant and bookkeeper, and stayed on for a couple of years. Then I moved to a similar position, somewhat better paid, at a railway junction. I did my work efficiently, but was not particularly interested in it. The social life in these small communities appeared to me to be empty and dreary. There was no culture at all. Nobody was interested in politics, it seemed. Yet I was constantly observing and studying humanity.

I had a succession of such jobs in various towns. The first World War was being waged in Europe, but South Africa was not involved and seemed only mildly occupied by it. My one major ambition was to send sufficient money to Scotland to bring my unmarried sisters to woman-short South Africa.

The market for wives was much better in South Africa than back in Scotland. I eventually brought my sisters over not in chronological order, but in the order in which I thought they had the greatest chance of being snapped up by the customers, so to speak. I made a regular business of it, planning a proper campaign, and am pleased to say that I was successful at placing the lot.<sup>28</sup>

For recreation we played cards. I read many books, but always the Bible, and spent hours in casual conversation. On the whole, I had peace of mind. You must remember that I was still very young, and the seeds of the future were as yet unplanted in my mind.

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<sup>28</sup> The following sisters came to South Africa. Janie around 1913, Annie in 1916 and Rose in 1920

## CHAPTER IX

Distant relations of mine came to the fore. They had been studying me for a while, and decided that I now had sufficient experience in business to be of use to them. They were into business in a big way, and owned several farms in the Cape Midlands. I was appointed as general manager of one of these farms.<sup>29</sup>

The five years I spent there were probably among the most pleasant in my entire life. It was a peaceful experience, satisfying to the soul, and absolutely suited to my simple outlook and needs. The work was congenial and interesting. The farm itself was delightful about 7,000 acres in extent, and devoted to sheep and wheat.

As the general manager I became lord over a wide domain. I had to supervise and direct all the farming operations, which were carried out by an Afrikaner foreman and a score of Cape Coloured labourers. In addition to these duties, I was in charge of a general dealer's store, which included the local postal agency and telephone. Finally, I also acted as agent for my relatives in the purchasing of produce, wool, hides and livestock.

All this sounds like a great deal of work and responsibility. Actually, I had a large amount of time for myself. It was only necessary to open the store at certain hours, or when something urgent was required. I had a very comfortable house all to myself, with several servants to look after me. There was a magnificent library in the house, with fiction and non-fiction, modern and classic, including numerous volumes of biography and history. The owners had probably purchased the whole works, library included, from a deceased or insolvent estate.

For a young and unmarried man it was a good life. I have never minded leading a solitary existence, provided I have the companionship of books. Being alone is not the same as loneliness. To be by oneself occasionally is good for a man. One can read, listen to the radio, work quietly and peacefully. Boredom should be impossible for a man with a mind of his own. Many amusements and distractions can become wearisome.

The Cape Coloured servants were all humble and respectful, addressing me with the same subservience shown by the slaves in the old South of the United States. Today, I would call myself a liberal on the South African colour question, and my attitude was one of the reasons for eventually leaving South Africa. But at that time one took the existing situation between white master and coloured servant for granted. The way of life was firmly and deeply established, and we seemed hardly aware of these people as having human problems of their own. There was one woman, who would regularly each year creep into a hut that we used as a store-room, and deliver her

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<sup>29</sup> This has to be the Lurie family. Saul Jacob Lurie (1833 -1905) married Rebecca Luntz (1849 – 1932), who was Leon's mother's sister. Saul had 4 sons. Nissen Wulf (1878 – 1929) was a commodities broker and later lived on a farm in the Hendon district near Middelburg in the Cape Province; Leopold James (1883 – 1917) was a farmer in the Hendon district. He drowned in the Gamtoos River on 4 March 1917 and I suspect it was this property that Leon was sent to manage; Nathan (1886 – 1939) was a produce merchant; and Leon (Izak) Lurie (1890 – 1961) was a sheep and wheat farmer who came to South Africa in 1910 and also lived and farmed in the Hendon district

baby without benefit of husband, doctor or midwife. It seems crude and animal-like now, but at that time nobody on the farm thought it in any way unusual.

My relatives used to come now and then to visit their estate. They were somewhat naive about farming matters. One of them suffered from insomnia. Whenever I had word that they were coming I gave strict orders to lock up all the dogs so that their barking would not disturb him.

Once, when he was watching the milking of the cows, he pointed out that the natives had left one out of the line and had forgotten to milk it. No doubt he was trying to show me that he, the owner, had seen something that I, the manager, had missed. "It's very hard to milk that one safely," I explained. "It's a bull!"

During one wool-buying season my employer's expected prices to rise sharply. They sent me orders to interview a big wool farmer in the district, a certain Mr. Venter. His clip was expected to come to 200 bales, and I was to buy it even if I went slightly above current market prices.

Now Venter was a very honest and straightforward man. He told me bluntly that he was not prepared to sell the wool out-of-hand. He was inviting all the buyers in the district for the following Tuesday to see the bales of clipped wool and to lodge their tenders with him. He would then sell to the highest bidder, making no favourites.

On the Tuesday there were a dozen important buyers assembled at the farmhouse. I was the youngest, least known and least experienced. We all sat down at the large farmhouse table to drink the inevitable fresh-brewed strong coffee. Then Mr. Venter told us to come out to the packing-house to see the clip. After that we could write out our tenders, seal them, and he would open all the envelopes in front of us, the highest bid to be accepted.

The situation was something like a lottery or a gamble. I examined the wool carefully, according to all the rules of the trade and the lessons I had learned. Back to the house we went for some more coffee. I sat by myself in a quiet corner, took out my notebook and pencil, and started juggling figures and calculations. In no time I had filled out pages and pages of my book. It was the biggest deal ever entrusted to me, and I was determined to make good.

My reputation was at stake. If I lost the purchase, I would be thought inept; if I overbid by too much, I would be considered a reckless youngster. How was I to find the happy medium?

Time was running short. From the hundreds of calculations I had made, I decided to offer 24 pence a pound, and wrote this figure down on my tender. But before handing it in, I suddenly had a thought that it was too round a number. For good luck I added another farthing. This would not make an extraordinary difference to the total cost, but might look very shrewd to Mr. Venter.

With a silent prayer in my heart I sealed the envelope and handed it to the seller. Slowly and without talking he opened the envelopes and sorted out the offers. Finally he stood up, stretched out his hand to me and proclaimed: "This is the buyer! His offer is twenty-four and a quarter-pence, and I'm accepting it!"

The second-best offer had been 24 pence exactly. The buyers cheered and clapped, as if they had been at a sporting event. Used to the hazards of their trade, they were not jealous, but instead rather proud of their reputation for sportsmanship. Several of them asked who the shrewd youngster was, who had out thought them.

Then Mr. Venter threw a bombshell at me. He said that as I was unknown to him, he could not accept my cheque. I would have to pay in cash, and the sum involved was in excess of 20,000 pounds! I had visions of needing to come with a heavily armed bodyguard somebody said jokingly that they would be "looking out for me in the bush"! I was so dazed, excited and anxious that I did not know what to say or do. Fortunately one of the buyers, an elderly gentleman who knew my employers well, said with a laugh that I would not need to provide artillery - he would be prepared to guarantee my cheque. At about this time in my career I started to think about marriage as a good idea for me. I lived very comfortably in a large furnished house, and servants and food were plentiful. A wife and family would not involve a great deal of extra expense over my single life. By that time I had married off all my sisters,<sup>30</sup> and I was prepared to concentrate my matrimonial ambitions on myself. However, although the idea entered my head, I was not quite ready.

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<sup>30</sup> Janie Married Nathan Lurie in Middelburg on 18 June 1913; Annie married Benjamin Pienaar (later Lapiner) in Port Elizabeth on 28 February 1917; and Rose married Max Brickman in De Aar, Cape Province on 20 November 1921



## CHAPTER X

Life as a farm manager was easy and pleasant enough, but I became steadily tired of my position as an employee. I was twenty-six years old. Since the age of fourteen I had been working diligently and responsibly for others. Currently, while receiving eight pounds a month all found, plus an annual bonus of twenty-five pounds, I was supervising and making thousands of pounds for my relations. It was high time to remove myself from my rut, and become my own man.

When this revelation came to me, I sat down and wrote an ultimatum, proposing for myself a working partnership in the business. My relatives would provide the capital, and I would supply the brains and direction. Somewhat to my surprise, they agreed. They apparently thought that they could not afford to lose a capable manager, and agreed to make me a partner. As luck would have it, the price of wool boomed. My share of the partnership profits amounted to one thousand, five hundred pounds instead of the twenty-four pound wage I would have received if I had not come to my senses.

However, this happy situation was not to endure. Despite our mutually beneficial relationship, and our past association, differences arose between us that could not be resolved amicably. All too soon, we were in the hands of the lawyers.

I was still in possession of the business. One day I received a letter from my partners, informing me that they were coming up that weekend for a disarmament conference. I had an inner feeling that three against one<sup>31</sup> was heavy odds, even around a conference table, and that I might find myself looking for a lift to Cape Town on the Monday morning. So I locked up the business and kept the keys inside my boots. Despite all their urging to open up, I took no chances. According to my calculations, possession of the keys was ninety-nine points of the law.

"I'll give you the keys when we've settled our business," I told them. They were shocked by my lack of trust. After all, they were relatives, and fabulously wealthy, but I was prepared to die with my boots on.

In the end they agreed to pay me a total of three thousand pounds to take my boots off, and thus free them from their erstwhile partner. Half the amount was paid in cash, and half by guarantee. This was not bad work, to make three thousand in my first three months of business. I thought to myself: Who would choose to remain a clerk? Oppenheimers and Joels<sup>32</sup>, look out for me as I make my way up the business ladder!

There I was, twenty-six years old, no longer a pauper. I was suddenly a rich young man, and as smart as they come. This was my own opinion, of course! My friends naturally clustered round with advice. Go carefully with such money, they told me.

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<sup>31</sup> Nissen, Nathan and Leon Lurie

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Oppenheimer (1880 – 1957) a gold and diamond magnate who founded De Beers and controlled the Anglo American Corporation; Jack, Woolf and Solomon Joel made a fortune in diamond and gold mining in South Africa

Easy come, easy go! They told me to buy a house, put some money into a savings account, buy a little stock, and live safely and happily ever after.

But I was bursting with grandiose dreams of my own. I had discovered the great difference between an employer and an employee - it was the courage to take the plunge.

My relations had made thousands of pounds by speculating on wool. They had done this all on credit, without putting in a penny of their own money. However, the wool market happened to take a downward trend at that time, and I could not expect to get rich quickly that way. Instead, I decided to invest my money by purchasing a general store in the city. This was respectable, easy, and lucrative as well, because of my years of experience. Storekeepers such as these supplied the local farmers, on credit, with everything they needed. When the harvest came in, the benevolent and trusting storekeeper collected what was due to him.

I heard of a large store that was for sale. It had several departments, selling machinery as well as produce and goods. It was well stocked and well equipped. The owner was an old man, named Hendriks, who had decided to retire after more than thirty years in the store.<sup>33</sup>

"The price is twelve thousand pounds," Hendriks told me after he had shown me all over the store and its contents.

"I'm afraid it's beyond me," I said. "I like everything about it, but it's way beyond my modest means."

"Look here," said Hendriks. "I like your face. I'm a good Judge of character, and I can see that you are capable and hard-working. Pay me one thousand, five hundred pounds, and I'll take bills for the rest."

"Done!" I said on the spot. So I became the owner of one of the largest stores in the area, and all on credit.

Naturally, the talk in the surrounding towns and farms was of a fabulously wealthy young man, and I cut quite a figure. Business boomed. For some time I was really riding high.

But then came a down-swing in the economy, and I found myself in financial difficulty. I could not meet my bills to old Hendriks. I decided that the only way out would be to reduce the size of the business and eliminate some of the departments.

When I told Hendriks about my plan he was furious. "What, you want to destroy a business that took me thirty years to build up? Am I worrying you for the bills? You just keep going. I'll leave you alone until things are better."

Naturally, with his years of experience, I agreed to his advice. For a while, I seemed to be weathering the recession. But then one day, when I was returning from a

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<sup>3333</sup> H. Sohr and company in De Aar, Cape Province

business trip to the coast, I met a friend at the station. "Did you hear the news?" he blurted out to me, in great excitement. "Old Hendriks died in his sleep!"

My heart felt numb. Not only was I sorrowful because I had lost an old friend. But I was also anxious at how his death would affect me personally. That might sound callous on the face of it, but I suspect that we all have that reaction at the loss of a loved one or close acquaintance. In the last resort, we are all individuals, mutually influencing others but governed by the need for self-preservation.

In due course I would discover how the death of Hendriks would affect me. Two executors of the estate came calling. The dominant one was a dour Scot, as hard as the toughest stone in the Highlands.

He produced my bills from his briefcase, in a seemingly never-ending pile of sheets. Throwing them on the table, he demanded what I proposed to do about them. I told him and the other executor about the gentleman's agreement between old Hendriks and myself. They shrugged impatiently.

"We know nothing about that arrangement," said the unsmiling Scotsman. "I'm afraid that you have to pay up within three months."

I knew that this was absolutely impossible. My temper rose because of his contemptuous attitude. I took the keys to the store from my pocket, threw them on the table, and walked to the door.

"Do what you like with the business," I said. "I'm going!"

But it did not turn out to be as easy as that. I was prepared to lose the business, but in the end lost everything I possessed, and my good name as well. I was pushed into declaring bankruptcy.<sup>34</sup> At one time I could have settled with creditors for seven shillings and six pence in the pound. But I could not obtain the necessary guarantees, not even from my relatives.

So I had to go through that most bitter and harrowing of experiences, to see everything I possessed sold for next to nothing. I was present at the sale of my assets, and saw goods, for which I had schemed and planned and sweated, sold for a mere traction of their true value. And who benefited from ruining my hopes like this? The creditors realised almost nothing. How much better it would have been if that grim Scot had been as trusting as old man Hendriks, if he had only given me a chance and allowed me to weather the storm. But no, he thought that it was shrewd to be so tough, and in the end the estate and the other creditors paid for his harshness.

So I left the store with literally only the clothes on my back. After all my years of striving and battling to make my way, I was an insolvent and a nobody.

I left the town and did odd jobs for a while, throughout the Cape, in order to survive.

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<sup>34</sup> Leon was finally declared bankrupt on 27 March 1924

One day, while visiting homes for the Jewish festivals, I met a girl<sup>35</sup> at the home of her aunt. She was quiet and genteel, an ideal companion. Her family owned a large sheep farm in the Karroo, near the store where I was currently working. They were plain people, sincere and home-loving. She and I grew very fond of one another, and her parents liked me too.<sup>36</sup>

Despite my recent insolvency, she believed in me. With mutual love and trust, we were married<sup>37</sup>. Her father set us up in a small business in a provincial town<sup>38</sup>. As I was still an "unrehabilitated insolvent", the business was put in my wife's name.

Despite the loss of my name, that was perhaps the happiest year of my life. My wife and I loved each other and were happy and content together. We did not demand much of each other and of life, as my lofty ambitions had been curbed by the disaster that had befallen me. Together, we had that most valuable of assets - contentment and the future seemed bright. When in due course our baby son was born<sup>39</sup>, I was way up in the clouds. I had majestic plans for expanding the business so that my son would enjoy all the possible benefits that financial security could offer.

Then, suddenly, I was beset by a calamity, a tragedy that destroyed me completely. Just three weeks after childbirth, my young wife died from the after effects<sup>40</sup>. I remember as if it were yesternight the last evening with the young woman, my bride only a year before, and now the mother of my child. All alone in the house with the dead body of my wife, I felt that all the light had gone out of my life. It was Friday night, the eve of the Sabbath. I lit the Sabbath candles, just as she used to do herself, but they burned away in the course of the night. Two other candles remained alight next to my wife's young body, but even they were slowly dying. Had I still retained the religious convictions of my youth, I might have prayed. As it was, I watched her in the flickering candle-light with an empty desert in my heart. As there was nobody else to care for my infant son, her parents took him from me. My wife had died without making out a will, which meant that I inherited nothing and had no right to any of the assets registered in her name. Her father, however, preserved the estate for his grandson, my child.<sup>41</sup>

Like Job, I was stripped of everything I possessed. I left the Karroo carrying nothing but my bitter memories and miseries. I was determined to leave the graveyard of my loved one and of my hopes, and went to seek better fortune in Cape Town.

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<sup>35</sup> Leah Sarah Glatt (1897 – 1924)

<sup>36</sup> The Glatt family farm was called Zuurlangslagte and was in the Williston district of the Cape Province. Leah's parents were Benjamin Glatt (1858 – 1932) and Ellen Glatt (Nee Smollan) (1867 – 1931)

<sup>37</sup> Leon and Leah were married at Williston, Cape Province, on 21 March 1923

<sup>38</sup> Somerset East

<sup>39</sup> Lionel Harris Hodes at Somerset East, Cape Province on 17 March 1924

<sup>40</sup> Leah died on 11 April 1924 at Somerset East, Cape Province

<sup>41</sup> My father, Lionel. This was not to be. As my dad mentions in his memoirs, "Ellen, who had in born in Russia in 1867, died in Williston in 1931 aged 64 and Benjamin, who was born in Nieunstadt, Lithuania around 1861, died the following year, at age 71. It was during a time of severe drought and the Great Depression. He did not leave a will and the Master of the Supreme Court put all the properties up for auction, and they were sold for less than the bonds over them."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I arrived in Cape Town a very despondent, almost a broken man. My beloved wife was dead, my good name was lost, my assets and child had been taken from me. What remained of all my great hopes and dreams? Apart from the personal tragedy, what had happened to the man who had made thousands in a few months and was dreaming of becoming a millionaire?

I could not plan anything, let alone even think about business. All I wanted was to get back into a white-collar position, with enough remuneration to pay my board and lodging at some cheap boarding-house. Somehow or other, I had to preserve my respectability at all costs. But even my new modest demands could not be fulfilled. Nobody needed me as an accountant. A friend suggested that I try my hand at becoming a furniture salesman. In despair, I decided to give it a try, until something more permanent turned up. As a salesman, I would receive only a commission, and no salary, but the advantage was that I could get to work with minimum outlay. The only equipment I needed was a catalogue.

Apart from my stint at selling sheet music when I was a boy, I think now that this furniture job was the hardest I ever had. It was necessary to pay innumerable calls on householders before finally striking gold with an order. My own self-respect convinced me that I was an unwelcome visitor if the people really wanted furniture, they could easily go to a showroom and see the actual models for themselves. But there I was, with my catalogue, endlessly talking and wheedling, trying to appeal to housewives above the resistance of their husbands. Some days I drew complete blanks, sometimes it was not so bad. I hated the continual coaxing and cajoling, and felt that it was cheapening myself. However, the commission was adequate.

One of the partners in the firm where I worked was a miserable character, an unhappy, chronically grumbling type. If I came in without orders he would say to me: "What is the good of you to us? A travelling salesman without sales?" If I happened to bring in some decent business, he would complain about the good money they were wasting on my commission. After a few weeks, I had had enough of such a life.

But the experience was to prove invaluable to me later, when I blossomed out into a businessman again, on my own account. In the meanwhile, I was earning sufficient to pay my way in my boarding-house.

When I originally arrived in Cape Town, a sister had recommended to me a certain hotel as being ideal for such a prominent member of the family as myself. But when I saw the palace from the outside, and had checked my impressions by looking inside at the tariff for board and lodging, I decided that my sister had over-estimated my importance. It was then that I decided on this small boarding-house, comfortable and friendly. Most of the patrons were simple country people, Jews like myself, who had to be in Cape Town for some time and who were not concerned about making an impression on the world.

The places opposite me at the table where I habitually sat were taken by a widow and her delightful little girl<sup>42</sup>. I did not pay them any particular attention, treating them just as I did the other boarders. But one evening, when I was sitting in the lounge reading the newspaper, the proprietress came over to me and said: "I want to ask you a favour. That lady over there has to visit some people a fair distance away. As the night is rather dark, would you mind escorting her?" Being always guided by duty rather than emotion, I felt it my obligation to agree to so modest a request. The two of us started walking, somewhat tentatively at first, behaving rather like a motor-car engine in cold weather. But gradually we warmed up, and by the time I left her at her destination we were chatting away amiably.

I returned to my lodgings, conscious that I had performed a good deed, but not giving the matter any further thought. Still, we had become acquainted, and during the weeks that followed we started to become friendlier and friendlier.

I did not realise it, but in no time everybody in the boarding-house was frantically engaged in match-making, from the proprietress down to the children. To each of us they extolled the virtues of the other, our wonderful material and spiritual qualities, with not a word said about any faults or drawbacks. In no time they had me whirled away like paper in a tornado. I felt that I was flying through the air, that my bad times were over if I could only persuade the lady to accept me. For our friends in the boarding-house it was like an election campaign, with everybody vying to be the one to bring the candidate to success and glory.

But I saw no signs of the lady being enthusiastic about me. Why should she be, I asked myself, knowing my background and what a mess I had made of my life? Time and again I asked her to marry me, receiving evasive and non-committal answers. Maybe she thought that it was more ladylike for her to do so, maybe she had genuine doubts. I wrote her letters which were masterpieces, but she admired my style without accepting my proposal.

In the end I lost count of how many times I had asked her, and determined to ask no more. I delivered an ultimatum, saying that I would not see her again until she made up her mind, and gave her two days to decide. Within the stipulated time she sent for me. I dressed as smartly as I could, and rushed happily to see her. She still had nothing definite to say!

A few evenings later, all my resolutions forgotten, I asked her again. And this time, to my utter amazement, I received a warm-hearted acceptance. Women are the strangest creatures! I am sure she had decided long before that she wanted me.

There was great excitement in the boarding-house. Everybody thought that he or she had been the one to pull it off. Happiest of all, naturally, was the future bridegroom.

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<sup>42</sup> Rachel Rabinowitz (1895 – 1975) and her daughter Harriet. Rachel had married her half uncle, Harris Rabinowitz, in Lourenco Marques but he died shortly afterwards in Worcester, Cape Province, on 25 October 1918 from the Spanish flu. Their daughter Harriet was born in Worcester on 26 June 1919

So Rachel and I married quietly<sup>43</sup> and rented a pleasant little house in the suburbs of Cape Town. I brought my child away from his grandfather<sup>44</sup>, who had been caring for him all this time. My step-daughter Harriet and my son Lionel grew up together. My wife and I went "Scotch" she bought the furniture and piano, and I the smaller items.

My remarriage brought me back from the depths of despair to the heights of contentment, with my son restored to me, sharing a new home with my new and present wife, as well as a lovely ready-made daughter.

The most amazing thing about human life is its resilience that is why suicide seems to me to be the most unforgivable of stupidities. Who knows what tomorrow may bring, of joy as well as sorrow?

Marriage is a serious business, full of pitfalls and surprises, especially in modern times. It does not matter whether you marry for love, for money, or for convenience marriage is more speculative than even the wool trade! Our amalgamation of resources by remarriage - a merger, you might call it has lasted ever since, with successful returns in all branches of the business. Of course, my wife and I are two different people, and at times we disagree on outlook, tastes, and standards. But on the whole our married life has been a happy one. Co-existence, and agreement to differ, have made for happiness and stability, and we have produced three more children on our own, to add to the two we brought into the partnership.

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<sup>43</sup> In Cape Town on 20 June 1926

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Glatt. Actually Lionel was looked after by his grandmother Ellen and her unmarried daughter Lieba Glatt (1895 – 1973)



## CHAPTER XII

As a newly married man, all my courage revived, and I determined to get out of the furniture business.

Ever since the day I arrived in Cape Town I had carried in my pocket a personal letter of recommendation to "Sammy" Cohen, a partner in one of the largest Jewish wholesale houses. "Sammy" was a fabulous character, a slightly built grey-haired man, but an original beloved by all. He was the source of innumerable stories about his kindness and shrewdness and oddities of speech.

When he was worried he used to say: "I am between the devil and the W.C." On one occasion he grew impatient with a girl on the telephone and told her to go to hell. She complained to her manager, who demanded that Sammy apologise to her. Sammy rang her up and said sweetly that she did not need to go to hell anymore! If customers came into the store carrying parcels he used to demand an explanation as to why they had been purchased elsewhere. One lady explained, rather apologetically, that her parcel was only a "lay-by" an article paid for over a period, with delivery on the last payment. "Well," said Sammy belligerently, "Why couldn't you lay by me?"

Prior to my marriage I had not used my letter of introduction to Sammy, but I decided that it was time to discuss my situation with him. He read the letter carefully and told me that his friend, whose opinion he valued, had spoken very highly of me in the letter. "But I'm afraid that I have nothing for you at present," he said, with a tone of regret. "Nothing appropriate. I can't offer a married man, with your qualifications, a job as a counter-jumper."

He hesitated and scratched his head. "Why don't you do what we all did when we first came to South Africa start a "weekly". We'll help you with goods and credit. But I did not allow him to finish. I was very hurt at his suggestion. A "weekly" was a man who carried samples in a suitcase, selling the goods on order, payments to be made each week. "How can you expect me to do that?" I demanded angrily. "I'm not a greener! I'm an educated man, an accountant!"

"I'm sorry I suggested it," Sammy said soothingly. "I understand your feelings. I just said it because I had nothing else to offer you at present."

I left his store, upset and disheartened, and must admit that, outside on the pavement, I wept tears of frustration. Completely desperate, I felt that I could not go on as a furniture salesman.

Then an inner voice suddenly shouted advice at me: "Go back! Do as Sammy tells you! Look at their prosperous wholesale store, built up from being weeklies. Who do you think you are, a king? Too proud to carry samples?"

Back into the building I went, straight to Sammy's office. "I've reconsidered," I said. "I'm going to accept your kind offer. In me you see your latest 'weekly'!" Sammy was delighted. "I'm sure you'll make a success. You won't be sorry. We'll help you all we can."

With tremendous mental agility Sammy started to calculate everything I would need to get started, the best way in which he could help me. You must take underwear, linen, drapery, material, everything the housewife might want. But only samples, no stock, mind! You'll have to carry everything in a big suitcase! We'll fill all your orders you can sell to Madame - one article, or a pair, or anything she likes! I don't care that we're supposed to deal wholesale, I'll back you up to the limit! Don't worry about money, either, you can make your own conditions as to terms..."

On and on went Sammy in his enthusiasm. Eventually I left my excited benefactor, staggering under a heavy suitcase loaded with every conceivable sample to catch a lady's fancy.

On the face of it, things looked bleak. Without a penny of capital to my name, with a wife and two children to support, I was out on the road, a peddler. Yet my heart was full of hope, because Sammy had infected me with his optimism. Besides, I had a brain, as well as courage and determination, and felt sure that I would yet make a success of my life.

Actually, when I staggered out under my suitcase on that fateful morning, and moved its irksome weight from shoulder to shoulder, I was setting off on a business venture that is continuing even today, five thousand miles away from where I started. Although I only suspected it, I was back in the saddle again.

I sat up till midnight on that first day, marking the selling prices of all the lovely samples Sammy had given me. What a range! There was something for everyone in the family father, mother, adolescents, children, babies. The motto was: we aim to please, money back if dissatisfied. And then, at midnight, came the greatest inspiration of my life "A SHILLING A WEEK!"

That was my mighty slogan, which revolutionised my life - A SHILLING A WEEK! I sometimes think that I should make an artistic design with those words, to send to each of my children, to put up in their offices or homes since it was a shilling a week which educated and established them. There were plenty of salesmen going from door to door with suitcases, but they were all operating in a primitive way, selling inferior goods at high prices, trying to catch the passing fancy or frailty of the woman of the house. But I was determined to play straight, and provide real value. I would become a walking Woolworth, selling everything the family needed on terms they could easily afford. After all, I was sure that Sammy would back me up to the hilt.

So, on the following day, lugging my suitcase of samples, I descended by train on the innocent suburb which I had selected for my first attack. I had planned my campaign with the care of a Field-Marshal. The past was forgotten I was living only for the future.

How I super-sold on that first day! I put my foot into the door as soon as the poor housewife opened it, so that she could not slam it in my face. I had my suitcase open and my speech in high gear before she knew what had happened. "No obligation to buy anything just look at my samples not the usual rubbish - don't worry about money after all, I only want a shilling a week!"

I urged, I pleaded, I conquered. Who could resist that catchy slogan, which suddenly made available so many things which previously had only been dreams? From my position at the front door I badgered her into the kitchen or front room, her eyes feasting on the lovely items I showed her. Forgotten the milk on the stove, the baby's bottle!

"Only a shilling a week? Are you sure it's not a trick? There must be a catch I suppose that I won't get the goods for months..."

"Delivery tomorrow, madame just sign the order you don't pay a penny till you get the goods. And then it's only a shilling a week for every pound's worth you buy twenty weeks for payment..."

The results were amazing. It took me three days to cover the first street from the station, with an almost 97 percent yield. There were three blanks two obstinate and stupid women on whom I wasted hours of my time in vexation, and one closed door on which I banged in vain.

The next day I went back to the wholesalers to have my orders executed. The entire staff was astonished. Sammy, of course, was cackling with glee that his protege had made good. My biggest-selling item was 48 pairs of Ladies Hose, known as 'Eve' - bless our dear but wayward ancestress! Yes, it was a wonderful line, good value, only three shillings and eleven pence a pair, and beautiful to look at. I bet Eve herself would have been a customer, even before she ate the apple and grabbed a fig leaf. My next best items were table squares and fancy embroidered pillow-slips.

I bought special account books for my customers, similar to bank pass-books, stating the items and having columns for payment. Most of my customers were working-class women with husbands in good and steady jobs.

I wondered how my collections would go. Well, it was amazing how my trust in human nature paid off. Most of the women said, "Oh, I can't be bothered with a shilling, please take five!" or else, "A shilling? No, here's a pound note." And sometimes "You know, it's my husband's birthday next week do you think you could bring a very smart pair of pyjamas?" And others told their mothers and sisters about me would I mind going to such and such an address? Orders followed orders, and my pockets sometimes bulged with coins not just silver, but even some of those lovely gold pieces which we used in those backward days, before the economists and financiers learned the art of printing banknotes. I would empty out my pockets in the store before Sammy's delighted but bulging eyes and so pay on my account as I went along. I remember one customer whose husband suddenly inherited money, and proudly opened a banking account. He insisted on giving me a cheque for the full amount. He was poorly educated, and wrote the cheque out laboriously. Naturally I did not look at it as I took it from him, as I wanted to show how much I trusted him. In fact, he immediately placed another substantial order. When I handed the cheque to the teller, he pointed out that it was made payable to the order of "Messrs. Ruled Feint & Margin". We puzzled over it, until we discovered that, on the cover of the account books I had given my clients, the printers had put those cryptic words, to identify the lines printed inside. The customer had thought it was my name!



## CHAPTER XIII

In the middle years of a man's life, nothing sensational happens. Through good fortune and hard work, my family and my business expanded. It would be boring to give a detailed description of my progression from suitcase to store, but the business took off wonderfully. Soon I had my wife helping me, then one assistant, then another. When Christmas came round, I was flooded with orders. It was necessary to rent a sample room at first, and then came a shop of my own.<sup>45</sup>

Basically, I was still working on the solid foundation on which my good fortune has rested ever since A SHILLING A WEEK. My shop was an unpretentious place, without elaborate show windows. It was on London Road, a side-street in Salt River, a suburb of Cape Town. All my relations promised me instant bankruptcy when they saw it. Who, they asked, would be tempted to buy from me? The answer, of course, was every workingman's wife who saw my famous sign on the window - they wanted the credit, the human trust and the fair treatment, much more than they wanted fancy displays.

Soon it was no longer necessary to go out on the road, or even to send out travelling salesmen. The customers came to me. These were either my steady supporters, or friends they recommended. I calculated that one-third of my debts were certain to be good eventually, one-third recoverable with difficulty, and one-third bad.

I found that it was better to have every new customer recommended by two old ones, rather than relying on lawyers or courts. When a woman defaulted, I would gently complain to the people who had recommended her: "You know so-and-so whom you sent me? She's let me down." This approach seemed to work well. The person recommending, while in no way legally responsible, would feel morally to blame, and take much trouble to bring in the defaulter to make arrangements.

It has always been my experience that most human beings are trustworthy, and prefer to do the honest thing rather than the dishonest. There are very few people who deliberately try to trap the shopkeeper. Of course, many people buy on credit because they are over-optimistic about their future ability to pay. But the credit system works because the average person respects their duties when they undertake a responsibility.

Many a customer used to ask me, "How do you know you can trust me? Say I don't pay?" "Well, Madam," I would answer, ""You won't be the first who didn't, and you won't be the last. But I prefer to think better of my fellow men and women."

Once I sold a coat to an attractive young woman. When she defaulted on her payments, I was forced to threaten to issue summons against her. She came into the shop with her mother, who seemed to be a very respectable woman. The mother said to me, "My daughter is a minor. You won't get a farthing out of her!"

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<sup>45</sup> Hodes Brothers, at 31 London Road, Salt River, Woodstock, Cape Town. Leon ran it with his brother William

"You may be right, according to law," I replied. "But you look like very honest people to me. How will you feel when you see that your daughter is wearing a coat for which she didn't pay? It will be as it she stole it!"

The mother thought for a moment, her face reddening, and then said, "Do you know, I never thought of it that way! Very well, I'm going to pay now." And so she did.

Another time I went round to the house of a woman who had defaulted. As she opened the door, and saw me there, she fell to her knees and caught hold of my feet. "Hush," she said softly. "My husband is sleeping inside. In the name of Jesus have mercy on me, he'll kill me if he learns that I haven't paid my debts!"

"Perhaps it would help me to get my money if I made a noise and woke him up," I said, but very softly, and went away. She came into the shop and paid regularly.

Once a customer recommended a certain Aberdonian who was boarding with her. Mac was working on a coastal steamer. She came in one morning, in great excitement, to tell me that Mac had suddenly decided to go back to Scotland, and was leaving on the afternoon ship. She was profoundly distressed that her recommendation was going to cost me money.

Well, the amount was actually small, but as an ex-Glaswegian I was not going to let any Aberdonian get the better of me! I rushed by cab to the ship and when Mac came aboard he found me waiting for him outside his cabin. He gave me a very unfriendly greeting, and said that he intended to send me the money from Scotland.

"If you don't mind, Mac, I'd rather have the money in my fist right now," I said bluntly.

For a moment he could not decide whether to fight or to laugh. Then he elected to make a joke of the affair. "Let me see what I've got for you," he said, and pulled out a handful of golden sovereigns. In those days, money really looked like money! Then he went on, in his broadest accent, "That's all I can spare you, if you'll take it in full settlement!"

"Done!" I exclaimed, satisfied to take the loss of a few pounds, and reached across for my money. "Not so fast, my friend," said Mac, pulling his hand back.

"You must first write me out a receipt saying that it's in full settlement. I want no bailiffs chasing me in Scotland."

This was fair enough. So I wrote him the receipt and once again held out my hand for the money.

"Don't be in such a hurry," he said. Look, I've played the game with you; the least you can do is give me a present for my son back home."

"The ship leaves in twenty minutes," I said. "Give me your address and I'll send the lad a shirt."

"Can I trust you?" he demanded. "You didn't trust me!"

"You know you can," I said. He gave me the money and we went to get his luggage across, before the ship left. Between the cab and the reduction and the shirt and the

drinks, I didn't make much money on Mac, but there was glory and self-respect in the transaction. And the honour of Scotland was saved.

It goes to show people are all right if you know how to handle them.

## CHAPTER XIV

After a while, there was the business racking up a turnover of three thousand pounds a month. Yet I never seemed to be a penny the richer only more and more involved. I was always short of cash - to this day I'm short of cash! Sammy of course was delighted with the success of his protege, but some of his partners pulled long faces when they examined my accounts. Sammy also introduced me to shippers and wholesalers, who sold other lines than the ones in which he dealt.

One of these shipping firms was an extremely conservative British company which limited me to a credit of two hundred pounds, according to their evaluation of what I was worth on my balance sheets. One day they told me that the head of the firm, a man of about eighty, was coming out from England. Naturally I didn't give the matter any thought at the time, but when I came into the shop a few mornings later my assistant very nervously pointed out a fine, erect old man, standing at one side. He introduced himself and asked if I minded if he looked around. The shop was full of respectable-looking customers. He saw the stocks I carried, the customers who came in, the way we handled them. After half an hour, he said, very calmly, "According to your balance sheet you are good for two hundred pounds credit and no more. According to my observations you are worth unlimited credit. I will give instructions accordingly." He made thousands of pounds in commissions through me.

Another wholesaler was more nervous. I had never kept him waiting for even a day for payment of his monthly account, but before Christmas I was placing orders daily - very heavy orders. When I went into his store one day to make my purchases he pointed out that I owed him a lot of money. "But I pay my account every month!" I said angrily.

"Yes, that's true," he replied. "But it's become so much now, I'm worried."

So I thought to myself, I'll make you pay something for playing Scrooge with me. "Look here," I said, "I'll pay you right now, if you'll give me an extra five percent discount."

"But I'm already giving you five percent for cash!" he said.

"Yes, but that's cash after thirty days. This is cash at once. Put it down to expenses, in lieu of sleeping pills, so you can rest at night!"

Well, he thought, and pondered, and worried, and in the end he agreed. I wrote him out a cheque on the spot less ten percent. "Are you sure this doesn't inconvenience you?" he asked.

"Quite, quite positive," I said. "I've plenty of money."

The moment I left his store, I rushed around to a friend and borrowed the money from him, in order to beat the cheque to the bank. My supplier had been quite right, I was short of cash at the time. But he was so impressed with the calmness with which I had paid him that the following day he phoned me, begging me to take more goods. I took them, too, but I insisted on a full ten percent discount. I knew the traffic could



bear it! After a while I was paying him monthly, as before, except that I was scoring an extra five percent deduction. It doesn't pay to be too suspicious!

The strange thing was that the better my business was, the less cash I had. I had credit galore but no money. While I gave six to eight months credit to my customers, I had to pay the wholesalers within thirty to sixty days. So I had great trouble maintaining my balance of imports and exports, just like Israel and other poor countries today. It took me ten years to stabilise my economy, as Ministers of Finance put it.

As far as my minor financiers were concerned, I used to obtain money on promissory notes, often having to borrow from Peter to pay Paul. I always managed to fulfil my promises. One of these men who helped me, an eccentric wholesale merchant, used to consider me a marvellous borrower. "It's a pleasure to lend you money," he used to say. "I just put your note into the bank and forget about it; I know that it will be paid. Now, with the others, their bills are never met, the bank rings me up, my bookkeeper is furious about his accounts, everybody shouts at me for being a fool. As for the barrowers, even they abuse me when I ask for my money, they call me ugly names..." I wonder if he ever knew how delicate the position sometimes was, how close I came to joining those who upset his bankers and bookkeepers! But I managed to keep my nose ahead of my notes. When I write of being short of cash always, let me make it clear that this applied to my business rather than to my home. In fact, I abandoned frugality willy-nilly after the business began to thrive. I did not want to deprive my family of the modern standard of living expected by my wife.

My own wants have always been simple and cheap a book and a pipe will suffice for my amusement. I am by nature much happier when leading a simple and ascetic life. But I had to keep up with the Cohens, and I did. I tried to keep something in reserve for emergencies or for the future, so I would delay buying that new car or even radio for as long as I could. But eventually I would cough up like a little lamb.

Thinking over what I've written from time to time, I may have given the impression that I attach an exaggerated importance to money. I don't value money at all, but I abhor the lack of it - what you might call the vacuum. As Bernard Shaw says, poverty is the deadliest of the sins, for it prevents a man from being a good husband and father.<sup>46</sup> If my own father had been more responsible, I might have had the education I wanted. I certainly gave my children chances which I never had myself. There's a saying that fire is a good servant, but a bad master. The same applies to money - never become a slave to it.

Too much money is a curse. I had to acquire some for the sake of my family. For myself, I am a simple man with limited demands on life. We get nothing for nothing - the poor man pays for his failure, the rich man for his success. The rich are always as much in "want" as the poor - they want the world.

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<sup>46</sup> In the play *Major Barbara*: "The worst of crimes. All the other crimes are virtues beside it; all the other dishonours are chivalry itself by comparison. Poverty blights whole cities, spreads horrible pestilences, strikes dead the very souls of all who come within sight, sound, or smell of it."

I have always considered myself the pioneer in the sort of business I established, the answer to the needs of the honest working family. Until then, such long-term credits had only been possible for them for the purchase of furniture, radios or other such hire-purchase goods. I made it possible for them to buy anything and everything. I like to think that any success was grounded in my belief in the basic honesty of humans tempered, of course, by some reasonable precautions.

Meanwhile, my wife kept the household running smoothly, and helped in the business when needed. We were happily married, although we proved to have quite contrary natures and interests. We live, even now, in a state of peaceful co-existence, varied by a fair supply of differences.

We had not married because of love at first sight but I have seen many such marriages end at second sight. Far more enduring are affection, sense of duty, and mutual respect. The secret of my contented married life is honesty, lack of greed, appreciation of the points of view of other members of the family. I never tried to mould or remake any of the others in my own image. Naturally, I have found that marriage is full of pitfalls. We have to take losses as well as profits. One of my daughters once said to her mother, "You were lucky, you married Daddy, but I'll have to marry a stranger" so I do not think that I have been so bad a father.

As for love affairs, I was too busy meeting my bills and keeping the family going to worry about such trifles. I doubt whether many simple men can carry on like Casanovas - their bank managers are sitting too hard upon their shoulders to let them cut a dash with the ladies!

## CHAPTER XV

The Great Depression of the early thirties had catastrophic effects on most businesses. There was tremendous unemployment, in Cape Town as elsewhere. When I saw many of my customers so reduced that they had to stand in lines for bread, I did not have the heart to ask them for payment. Nor would it have helped. I had a great deal of sympathy for genuine distress, for I had been in that position myself. I lost several thousand pounds through bad debts.

On the other hand, up till 1936, when the Union of South Africa followed England in going off the gold standard, we merchants scored heavily by importing goods from Britain, which landed cheaper in South Africa than they were when they left England. Not that our gains were much use - nobody had any money to buy them with! But at least we could feel both clever and rich, without the expenditure of much effort or brain-power.

Naturally, money was scarce for me as well, and I had considerable difficulty in meeting my obligations to my suppliers. Times were so bad that we were allowed five per cent discount if we met our bills on due date. Some generous wholesalers even allowed us to go a few days beyond the deadline and still gave us the allowance.

But one of them told me point-blank that there would be no discount if I was even one day overdue on my bills. I already owed him several thousand. So I suggested that he put my standing debts on a separate account. I agreed to pay normal interest on this debt, and to pay it off in monthly instalments. With regard to all future purchases, I would meet my bills on the dot. But I demanded the discount on the entire amount, past as well as future. Rather to my surprise, he agreed.

During the early years of the business the law still allowed civil imprisonment for debt, somewhat reminiscent of Dickensian times. The debtor had to sit in prison for a certain number of days, varying according to the amount owed. The creditor paid one shilling a day to the gaol for his keep. The debtor was not regarded as a lawbreaker, and was kept in a separate section of the prison.

Naturally, I hated this appalling system, but I had to use it with stubborn debtors, or any sort of credit business would have been impossible. Where a system of living provides certain weapons, anybody failing to use them is considered a freak - nobody will pay any attention to him. However, I only used it with those hard cases who could pay, but refused to do so. The Messenger of Court generally caught the debtors as they were leaving their places of work, or were on the point of entering their homes.

Once I had a Moslem debtor who had the money but thought that he was too clever to pay. I was prepared to take five shillings a week. When the Messenger of Court caught him, his tearful wife came to my house with a five-pound note in her hand, crying that he was religious and would be compelled to eat forbidden food. "Please go straight away and get him out," she wept, "before he touches any of the food."

"It serves him right," I said in a make-believe hard-hearted tone. "Five shillings a week you wouldn't pay but now you've found a fiver! It'll do him good if I leave him there getting into trouble with Allah!" But I swallowed my principles, and took the fiver.

Some of the shrewdies would abscond without leaving new addresses. For an outlay of a few shillings I would place a "small" in the local newspapers, offering a reward of ten shillings for the present address of the elusive customer. This device proved to be a deterrent, since the implication of the advertisement - a bad mark - was clear, although nothing was stated that he was

On one occasion the debtor himself came in to claim the reward! Another customer, a housewife, came weeping to the store: "Never repeat that advertisement, for the love of God! If my husband saw it, he would kill me!"

Most of the customers were honest. Few people are deliberately out to evade their obligations in this world, although many find circumstances too hard for them. Naturally, I was always fair and sympathetic with the honest debtors. One woman owed us fifteen pounds when her husband died, leaving her in very poor circumstances. "I'm an honest woman, I want to pay," she sobbed, "But I don't see how I can manage it." "Can you pay a shilling a week?" I asked her gently. "Yes, I can afford that," she said. For five years she came in regularly with her shilling, never missing a week. When she made her final payment she was the proudest person on earth. I gave her a handsome present.

One of my customers, a very excitable and arrogant old gentleman, had a nasty habit of quarrelling with his wife. He would then telephone us to stop her credit. On the following day he would call again: "We've made up give the old girl whatever she wants!" Sometimes we got muddled up, when the quarrels became too frequent, and we could not keep up with the bulletins from the battlefield. "That's all right," he said, when I explained the difficulty. "I understand."

Once a customer wanted some new handkerchiefs "The best you've got!" she said regally. I showed her a box. "Haven't you anything more expensive?" she asked. I offered her another box, of exactly the same type and quality, but asked for a higher price, saying, "I've got nothing more expensive than these!" With that, she beamed happily, and took them.

I put the extra profit from that transaction into my charity box, next to the telephone. A call cost two pence, but the standard charge then from call boxes was three pence. When customers used the telephone, I used to make them pay three pence to the charity box thus they contributed an extra penny to charity. The causes I selected were all deserving, and I disliked the idea of letting my customers use the telephone for nothing.

Now and then I used to receive letters, from debtors who had absconded, containing "conscience money. Sometimes it would be years after the goods were purchased and the debtor had disappeared. We had to go through the bundles of filed bad debts to find the account, and put it into the correct ledger. Sometimes, when a customer died destitute, the children and relations would pay the account to remove

the presumed stigma against the deceased. I always took weekly or monthly instalments, however small, to make it easy for them.

My customers were not strangers to me- I knew them personally. There were always strong links of personal interest and mutual trust between us. As their children grew up and started working, they would open accounts of their own. I would hand them their pass-books at little ceremonies, which the parents enjoyed very much. Occasionally, I even added grandchildren to my ledgers.

I helped them with advice, loans, taking the sick to hospital by car, or recommending them to other merchants for the purchase of furniture or radios, which I did not sell. Even now, In Israel, I still hear from them.

From the very beginning, I made it my rule never to open an account for a stranger or casual passer-by. Many women would come in with receipts from their grocer or butcher, but I would reply, "Sorry, Madam, I will only accept a new customer with a personal recommendation from one of my old customers."

This system gave me a moral claim although, of course, not a legal one against the person giving the recommendation. If the new customer failed to pay, I would shake my head sadly and gently complain to the recommending friend, who would hurry round to give the defaulter a sound moral lecture. This was usually more effective than a letter from a lawyer!

Naturally, I resented every dishonest customer as a blow to my self-esteem. It was proof that I had miscalculated in my ability to understand human nature, an ability of which I am very proud. It was always my experience in business that I got the best out of people by trusting them, and relying on their better nature. But I had to be vigilant and wide awake.

I can claim that I was the pioneer in South Africa of having a varied, well-stocked store supplying goods on credit to lower middle class and working-class families. Why, even at Christmas and the end-of-season sales, when I would clear my stocks, I still gave six months credit! No other businessman in Cape Town was doing it at the time, although later on many large chain stores, with branches throughout the country, used my techniques.

## CHAPTER XVI

For most of my life I avoided public office, considering myself by temperament unsuited for such antics as I saw performed by chairmen and their secretaries. Nevertheless, despite my dislike of politics, I once dreamed that I was offered the position of Prime Minister of England. When asked how I could manage without any previous experience or qualifications, I grandly answered that I would use the Bible, Shakespeare, and common sense. When I awoke, I remembered that Abe Lincoln had used these pillars of wisdom.

Sometime in 1942, however, I fell from grace. I became chairman of our local Observatory-Mowbray Hebrew Congregation.

Things had not been going well in the community. There was a committee in control, and an organised opposition, with strained feelings amongst the members. The big issue was whether the Rabbi was good or bad - some liked him because he was a traditional figure, others wanted somebody more modern. I was approached by the leaders of both factions, who explained that they wanted a neutral, non-partisan person to restore peace to the community. I refused. A week later I received a letter, informing me that a general meeting had elected me, almost unanimously, despite my absence.

I felt it my duty to accept the position. One of the items on the agenda of our first committee meeting was a demand by the opposition for the Rabbi's dismissal. I spoke up before anyone could say a word. "Gentlemen, this is a dirty piece of work that we, the committee, are asked to do. Let the members do it themselves. I say we can't do it in the Committee. Everyone must be in the decision."

I forced through a motion to send out a notice calling on all members to attend a special general meeting. The only item on the agenda was the Rabbi. I had simple voting papers printed: Are you in favour of dismissing our Rabbi Yes or No.

At the meeting, only 22 members of the congregation attended. I allowed them to talk the matter over, pro or con, for two hours. Then I closed the discussion and produced the ballot papers, appointing two scrutineers. The voting was 15 for the Rabbi, and 7 against.

"Gentlemen," I announced, "that settles the matter of our esteemed Rabbi for all time. The vote is more than two to one. Few Prime Ministers have done as well. From now on, I'll have no more criticism or discussion of this issue."

Some members complained that the decision was not binding, as not everyone had attended, but I was as fixed as the South Pole, and told them that they had all been perfectly free to come, and had only themselves to blame.

Following this I pushed through a decision to increase the Rabbi's salary by 50 percent. To meet the bill I joined with another committeeman and trudged around door to door collecting outstanding dues.

I organised Saturday afternoon services for the children, supported by cold drinks and sweets wrapped in blue and white paper, the Zionist colours. This, however, was

not a great success. Apparently to buy souls you need something more substantial than cold drinks and sweets.

I decided to become a lay preacher in order to attract worshippers, outside the three main Holy Days, by delivering a provocative sermon on Saturdays. It was the time of the initial Nazi successes in the war. I took as my text Psalm 73. "The prosperity of the wicked" - Hitler's rise. "Their eyes stand forth from fatness" - Goering. "Until I entered into the sanctuary of God, and considered their end" - the eventual hoped for outcome.

Personally, I think that my sermon was first-rate. I received many compliments, but the attendance at the Synagogue unfortunately. did not increase.

I remained chairman of the congregation for a year. At the next election I thanked them for their support, refused re-nomination, was praised most enthusiastically, and begged to reconsider. My methods had achieved their aim: there was peace in the community. But I decided that enough was enough, thus ending my first (and last) effort to be a leader of men.

## CHAPTER XVII

In 1941 I decided that it would be a good idea to invest in property. One could get a good return on the money, provided that one found the right sort of property and that the expenses for repairs and upkeep were not excessive. In those days Building Societies were practically begging people to take money from them at four and a half percent. They offered a high proportion of their estimated value of the property mortgaged. The return on ALL the money that of the investors and the bondholders could be built up to 10 or 12 percent. That meant a nice fat net return, not only on the owner's own capital, but also on that of the kind-hearted Building Society.

Furthermore, I calculated that such an investment would not take up too much of my time. I would hand over the collections of rents and the handling of tenants to an estate agent. All that I would need to do would be to find some way of spending my profits. After some time, perhaps, I would have the bother of selling the property at an enormous profit, and endure the misery of paying the necessary tax!

As I did not know anything about real estate values, I approached a friend of mine, believed to be an expert, and we arranged to buy property in partnership. This meant giving away half of my booty, but I looked upon the profit lost as insurance, and I have always been a fervent believer in insurance.

My interest was in a block of twenty-five cottages which were being offered on public sale. They were certainly not imposing, and not even attractive, but they seemed to me to be ideal for our purpose. The occupants were families of the lower income groups. Each cottage had three rooms and a kitchen, with a patch of garden in front and a large yard at the back. The rentals were very reasonable, three pounds ten shillings a month. A few days before the sale, we interviewed the tenants and they all made a good impression on us.

On the day of the sale there were very few prospective buyers.

I was delighted, thinking that it meant there would be less competition. My friend, however, was upset and suspected that something was amiss. But I was very optimistic, already calculating profits in my head.

Bidding was slow. Our offer of seven thousand pounds was the highest, but the auctioneer announced that the sale would not be confirmed - at that price the auction was subject to confirmation. In his office we clinched the deal at seven thousand, five hundred pounds.

I had promised a young attorney a chance to raise me a mortgage if I ever bought a property - he could pick up a respectable commission from the building society, so keen were they to lend out their money. A day or so later he telephoned me, his voice very sad and serious. "You're in the soup," he said. "They looked at the property. Not only did they refuse to give you the five thousand pounds, they won't even advance you a penny! What made you buy such a place?"

I thanked him for doing his best, went off on my own to another society, made out my application, and paid the inspection fees. A few days later I received an enthusiastic



letter, offering me five thousand pounds. So we each put in thirteen hundred pounds, and there I was, on the road to being a man of property.

I was a strict landlord with regard to the upkeep. I said to the tenants, "Consider the house your own. Treat it like your own." One tenant actually put in white tiles in her kitchen; another bought her own bath. I did whatever repairs the law required, but the success of the scheme depended on keeping expenditure down. When a landlord starts spending on making a tenant's home his castle, the return disappears like a bubble.

Before Christmas there came a clamour from the tenants for me to paint the houses and to slick them up generally. I understood their point of view, so to show that I was a sport, I bought tins of paint on condition that they did the work themselves. They were satisfied.

When we bought the property, there was no sewerage system. The Municipality wrote to us to instal it; we replied that if they could get us the materials, we would be delighted to comply with their request. This was during the war, when there were shortages of everything. As soon as the war ended, and goods became plentiful again, they wrote to us that we had to instal without any further excuses. We replied that we had no money any more. So they gave us a municipal loan, payable over eleven years, and we did the installation.

When the work was completed, we applied to the Rent Board for increased rents, in view of the heavy capital expenditure we had just made. All the tenants came to the hearing. Their spokesman was an old Scotswoman, who told the Board that if we would do up the houses, they would gladly pay extra rents. "You hear what the tenants say?" the Chairman of the Board said to me. "Get going, and come back when you've all agreed." So I typed out circulars calling on each tenant to write down exactly what they wanted. I told them firmly, "Think of everything and write it now don't come back later asking for more." They made out their lists, I engaged a contractor to do the job, and got each tenant to certify that it had been done. Back I went to the Board with my signed lists and no opposition. They gave us very generous increases.

I made use of that property for years, and eventually sold my half-share for what I had paid for it.

## CHAPTER XVIII

I followed events in Europe with growing consternation and dismay. It was obvious to me, as I am sure it was to millions of ordinary people all over the world, that the policy of appeasing Hitler was doomed to failure. But what could we do? What action could any of us take, to forestall catastrophe? In a democracy the government in theory represents the collective will of the population, but in practice a government acts more or less as it likes, for better or for worse (or even for the worst, between elections) while the common people go about their daily rounds. We listen to the radio, read the newspapers, talk, speculate, get angry, threaten to write letters to editors and go on battling to keep the wolf from the door.

So, helpless and infuriated, I saw from afar "the lights going out one by one" in distant Europe. I felt as if I could hear the gates of the concentration camps closing on famous Jewish communities, but I went back to my business of making two pennies grow where only one grew before. Sometimes I felt revolted by my own apparent indifference to the eclipse of the free world - but what could I do? Who would it have helped if I had neglected my business? Would Chamberlain have thrown away his umbrella if I threw away the future of my family?

While I was attending to business, the world slid into the inevitable war. In a matter of days Hitler marched through Poland. All the theories about General Mud holding up the advance of his tanks proved to be paper stupidity. Then came the few months of phoney war but they were followed by the great German successes. While Belgium, Holland and France went under the jackboot, all I could do was earn a living, read newspapers and listen to the radio. Even in the great hour of Dunkirk I could help the Allies only by concentrating on the latest news.

As Hitler spread his deadly power I felt more and more hopeless, although I never doubted that the Allies would eventually win. I was too old to become a soldier, my children were too young. But I doubted whether the war would be over before they reached fighting age. If not this war, they would suffer in the next one, or the one after that. And even after the Allies won, what sort of world would the statesmen build on the ruins?

The thought of the miseries of man in incessant self-destruction so obsessed me that I could not concentrate on business. One day I suddenly announced to my staff that I was going out. I rushed from the store to my car, and drove into the country. It was a grey, misty day. Leaving the car, I walked wildly through a deep pine forest, close to a river. The dappled and dripping woods were harmonious and tranquil the voices in the water cried to me above the imagined roar of the bombs. Is there any sound more lovely than that of running water? I lay down on a bed of sharp-smelling pine needles, and meditated on the past and the future.

There was born my inspiration. Everything seemed to click into place. My whole life achieved purpose and distinction I felt as Moses must have when he came down from Sinai. I had a message for the world! I would launch a crusade for the creation of a better world order a plea for peace, perfect peace.

I had done no writing since I was a boy: I had been occupied with that most pressing of all world problems, earning a living. But that day in the dripping woods, the thoughts fell like rain: I could not jot them down quickly enough. I determined to write a pamphlet which would point the way to the ideal future of mankind.

Still inspired, I drove home in a frenzy and wrote and wrote. My family and friends thought that I was crazy. I was not satisfied with my first draft, and went over it again and again. At long last I was satisfied: every word was perfect, every thought complete. So I set out to bring my great truths before humanity in its desperate need.

When Moses brought the word of God down from the mountain he found the people of Israel cavorting around a golden idol, indifferent to the moment of truth. I do not claim that I brought the word of God, but at least I expected that the world would pay some attention to my thoughts.

Nobody would read what I had written. I tried a few periodicals, but only rejections ensued. Perhaps my manifesto should have been written by Churchill, or some other famous person. Eventually I printed my ideas in a pamphlet, and sent copies to everyone I could think of, including General Jan Smuts, the Prime Minister of South Africa. The best response came from Smuts his secretary sent me an acknowledgement, but I will never know whether the great leader even read the immortal message from a simple man.

Reviewing my inspiration some twenty years later, I find that I was right in most things, and wrong in only some - so as a prophet I was well above the average.

In my pamphlet I began by pointing out that half an hour with an atlas and a history book would show anyone that there was scarcely a point on the earth's surface which had not known the horror of war. There was hardly ever a time in history when man was not bent on destroying his brother. I postulated ways and means to enable him to escape his own savagery. I insisted that there would always be war as long as nations bore arms, and I pressed for the elimination of all national ownership of instruments of war. This simple thesis led me to the further irresistible conclusion that the League of Nations had failed because it lacked the power possessed by private nations. The mouths of the world in council were satisfactory for talking but not for maintaining order! So I pressed for complete disarmament of the nations, and for an international peacekeeping force. I still see no solution to the terrible doom of annihilation poised over us from outer space, other than to deny to national statesmen, however apparently moral, the right to pull the trigger.

I argued that the world should be run by England, the United States and Russia, as benevolent leaders of a free world, with small nations given complete freedom within limits. My hopes for Russia proved sadly incorrect - instead of full cooperation, she has given us the cold war. Like the bear of Czarist days, the new Russia keeps stretching out its paw to take honey from the nests, whatever the effect may be on the bees. She has meddled in any number of countries in order to stir up trouble, irrespective of the risks to all humanity.

I believed that England should and would be rewarded for her resistance to the Nazis, when all other countries had abandoned the fight. In this, I was somewhat

over-optimistic about the world's capacity for gratitude. I should have realised that people would forget Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain.

I showed that, over a period of seventy years, the Germans had proved that they could not be trusted to keep treaties or to live in peace with their neighbours. I insisted that Nazi doctrines had to be exterminated from the face of the earth, that even the name "Germany" should be erased, and that Germans should never be allowed to become a political entity until they had truly proved their repentance. Under my system, the Germans could have been prosperous businessmen, industrialists, farmers and workers but not soldiers. or politicians. Now, they are demanding atomic weapons and will probably get them. I am full of foreboding.

I contended that we had to be sparing in the use of that finest of all systems, democracy: if given to countries not sufficiently mature for it, it inevitably degenerated into dictatorship. How right I was just look at that great "democratic" creation of Western diplomacy, Colonel Nasser! Generally, I was against the creation of numerous small nations apart from Israel, of course.

About Israel I was very certain, and I am pleased that my forecast proved correct. One of the few good things to come from the mangled peace was the Jewish State and even that would have collapsed if it had not been for the self-reliance of the Israelis.

I even drew up a blue-print for reforms to the democratic way of life, and for the control of vested interests such as the oil companies. I tried to think of everything...

On the whole, I think that "Peace, Perfect Peace" was a vast improvement on the war within peace in which we live, with rockets poised over our heads. There might be a few copies of my pamphlet lying around my store-room, for those who are interested in what an ordinary man thought in the darkest days of the war.

Naturally, my publication of a plan to save the world finished my reputation in the family. Only a lunatic would want perfect peace!

Our family became personally involved in the war when my eldest son, Lionel, together with several of his cousins, volunteered in the South African forces, as they joined with the Allies to battle the forces of evil in North Africa and Italy.<sup>47</sup> We listened to the radio daily and prayed for their safe return.

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<sup>47</sup> Lionel served in Italy in 1944 and 1945 with the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division. Leon's nephew Frank Ephraim Hodes, the son of Leon's brother Louis, also served in Italy

## CHAPTER XIX

So the locusts ate the years, the war was fought far away from the Cape Town radio and newspapers, my wife and I differed happily together, my customers bought on credit and I battled to keep a jump ahead of my payments to my wholesalers and suppliers.

I recovered from the infection that had been caused by the bite of the writing bug. It must have bitten fairly deep because I had paid in cash for the printing of my pamphlet. Nobody took any more notice of me than they did of Jeremiah. The life of a prophet can be very discouraging!

After my brief episode as a writer, the Minister of Finance in South Africa forced me to become a farmer. How did that happen? I had no desire to make money from the war, while others were fighting and suffering, but it was impossible to have a business in South Africa in those days without making more money than ever. Cash was plentiful, and goods were scarce, and one could not avoid making more money than one could handle.

That was the problem we were all making too much money, So the Government proceeded to cut itself in for its slice of the new cash. Apart from increasing the income tax they invented a new tax - Excess Profits Duty, a complicated affair whereby they took fifteen shillings in every pound one made in excess of one's earnings before the war in other words, seventy-five percent.

Many of the "boys" dealt in "hot money", as it was called cash deals without records to swindle the Government. I was not prepared for one moment to consider that. But the Government itself offered a perfectly legal way out of paying those extravagant taxes, in the form of farming.

Anybody who became a farmer could practically forget about having to pay taxes. Almost everything spent on a farm was permitted as a deductible expense. I think that the Government reckoned that it was good policy to encourage farming during the war years. A few years later they did cut the benefits, though.

So the smarties from the city, who had never in their lives seen a hoe or a plough, became farmers. They built dams, went into fancy irrigation schemes, bought livestock, planted trees and vines. Instead of talking cards and the stock market, they spoke learnedly about manure and ploughing. Naturally, a time was to come when farms would be fully developed and taxes would once again have to be paid, but that was all in the future. For the moment, nobody was worrying as they slipped their money into deductible expenses.

Apart from my very genuine desire to pay the Government as little in taxes as I could with honesty I had other reasons actuating me in my decision to become a farmer. Ever since the days when I had gone insolvent I had longed to show what I could do with the land. I liked the idea of the children growing up with the smell of the good earth in their nostrils instead of the reek of the tar of the pavements. I reckoned that I was doing the right thing, but naturally my wife opposed me strenuously all along the line.

I realised right away that I knew very little about farming, and so decided to consult all my friends and relations before buying. In the meanwhile, I looked around for something suitable.

I soon gave up on the idea of buying a well developed farm, or one producing wheat or vines, or one that carried good livestock, as such farms were highly priced. On that sort of transaction calculated that I would get at most eight and a half percent on my investment at that level I might as well satisfy my needs by purchasing a block of flats. I decided to buy a partly developed or even neglected farm, one that would be both a challenge to my abilities and an answer to the Receiver of Revenue.

One day I arrived at a farm which looked like just the thing for which I had been searching<sup>48</sup>. The owner was an elderly sheep farmer. It had quite a nice homestead, Labourers cottages and outbuildings. It was 250 acres in size. There were some neglected vines and fruit trees, also a few acres of sweet potatoes, maize and other vegetables. 60 acres consisted of pine forest, which I thought had considerable value, due to timber shortages caused by the war. A river running right through the middle of the farm provided unlimited water. The land was flat and the soil mostly alluvial; there was plenty of grazing for sheep and cattle.

On the other side of the river, where there was an orange grove of 20 acres, there was a boggy marsh, caused by bad drainage in the rainy season. This did not look too good. But the possibilities of the farm seemed to me unlimited. Farmers in the area were selling all they produced at high prices to the armed forces of the Allies.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked it. I took out my own bank manager and the manager of the branch in the nearest town. Wearing gum-boots, we tramped the entire length and breadth of the farm. Afterwards we had an excellent meal with the seller and over the coffee the bankers both told me that they thought it was a good buy. One of them calculated that the timber alone would bring in three thousand pounds. As we talked, I imagined my 250 acres all under fruit and vines but I asked for time to think it over. My manager told me not to hesitate: the bank would advance me the full amount of the purchase price, it would not cost me a penny. "Go on, sign on the dotted line," he said, "you won't be sorry." I could never resist so much credit, so I took out my fountain pen and signed.

When I arrived home that evening and told my wife my wonderful news, she nearly had a fit. "All on your own!" she declared passionately. "Don't expect me to come out there and milk your cows! I won't be a backveldt girl even if you want to call yourself a gentleman farmer!"

A few days later my bank manager rang me up to tell me that his head office was so pleased with my purchase that they had authorised a further loan of two thousand pounds, over and above the purchase price, if I wanted it, in order to start my development work. Banks are the devil just try to get money from them when you really need it! Anyway, there I was, a gentleman farmer, owner of a beautiful farm,

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<sup>48</sup> Nieuwehoop Farm in the Simondium district. Simondium is a hamlet 8 km from Paarl in the Western Cape

and with two thousand pounds in my pocket and all it had cost me was a signature or two.

You can imagine how pleased I was with myself almost as self-satisfied as my wife was disapproving. My children were also old enough to start their long careers as father-disapprovers. All this criticism only made me more determined to show what I could do. This purposefulness of mine they called obstinacy! I took possession within a week, found a capable manager and took a week's holiday from the business. For seven happy and excited days we trudged around the farm, my head as full of plans and dreams as the soil was of thorns.

I discovered why we were called "cheque-book farmers" the only farming I had to do personally was to sign cheques. And why not? What a pleasure it was to do so freely, without being terrified of those devastating letters, the saddest in the alphabet - "R/D".

Within a couple of months I had the family eating humble pie, all right I sold that pine forest for over three thousand pounds, Just as my bank managers had predicted. A firm of timber merchants paid cash, cut the trees down, and off they went. Then I sold some blue gums for a very high price to a Frenchman, who was buying for the Allies, for the building of some temporary docks in West Africa. He selected only trees which were fifty feet in length and twelve inches in diameter, and used special trucks and lorries to carry them away. He paid me twenty pounds a tree. They must have cost his government quite a packet by the time they reached West Africa. I always wondered why they were taking timber from South Africa to West Africa, which I had always imagined was full of forests, but of course it was not my business.

There I was, making money hand over fist, quicker than I ever could at A SHILLING A WEEK and crowing over the family.

However, I did have my headaches. I discovered that I could not expect any income from the fruit or vines for nine months, because the crop had just been picked, so I went in for some side-lines. I bought thirty-six cows in order to start making butter. On paper, it was a marvellous idea - apart from the butter, the residue of the cream could be used to feed the pigs and chickens. It would thus also provide lots of valuable manure for the orchards. But something went wrong with my calculations butter sold for two shillings and six pence a pound, while it cost me five shillings a pound to produce. Some of the cows even became sick and had to be disposed of.

I was advised that on a fruit farm we must have pigs to eat up the waste. Although I have never eaten pig products, I was satisfied from my reading of the scriptures that there was nothing to prevent a good Jew from breeding them for the Gentile market. It seemed so certain all they ate, I was told, was offal and waste. So I bought 150 pigs.

Here again, things did not work out according to plan. My pigs proved to be a fastidious lot. They were not satisfied with discarded food waste - I had to buy real pig food for them!

One morning I looked into the sty and found to my great delight that two of the sows had given birth to 31 piglets. I called the manager, and we were in heaven, calculating astronomical profits, our faith in the pigs rewarded. Alas, the following day only five of the piglets were alive the others had been smothered by the heavy sows. Subsequently, those that I sent to market were condemned, as they were infested with the measles.

One of my profitable side-lines came from poultry. I bought five hundred chickens and sold the eggs at full retail prices in my own shop, eliminating all middlemen.

The losses were borne by me with equanimity after all, my sleeping partner, the Minister of Finance, was bearing the brunt of the burden. Looking to the future, I hired bulldozers and cleared ground for new fruit trees and vines.

The days passed steadily. I lived in Cape Town with the family, but went out to the farm whenever I could manufacture a reason. I became a racing motorist as I scuttled from business to farm and back again. I felt fresh and happy. My face was bronzed by the sun, my appetite was insatiable, and I slept like a top. My tense city friends envied me, especially when I told them how much tax I was saving. I neglected the business, but it did not matter; with my brother in charge, it ran smoothly.

Everywhere I went on the farm, I made notes in a little pocket-book; I have always been a great believer in system. Some of the neighbouring farmers were more dubious about my chances of making good, despite my auspicious start. They warned me solemnly that farming was not just eating honey. I was not worried. Over the week-ends the farm was packed by our friends and relatives from the city and other towns in the area. My wife Rachel is a marvellous cook, and we entertained the guests with wholesome fresh food and clean country air. They enjoyed swimming in our own private stretch of the Berg river, instead of the crowded beaches by the sea, such as Muizenberg.



## CHAPTER XX

In time, the farm adjoining mine came up for sale, and would-be partners raised their heads. They suggested that we buy it, and amalgamate the two properties. Then we could go in for big-scale commercial farming, American style, with mass production, intensive cultivation, and the latest techniques.

As usual, I was tempted by such imaginative ideas. I started negotiating with the executor of the estate that owned the other farm. This consisted of 206 acres on the same river, and with the same possibilities. It had been neglected, and consisted of much empty land, but potentially it was a much better farm than my own. The deceased owner had been a wealthy Englishman, who had run the farm for pleasure and did not care a rap if it showed a loss of several thousand pounds a year. It suited him to entertain his friends there, and to send boxes of his fruit and grapes to all his acquaintances - the magistrate, the vicar and so on.

His home consisted of a lovely double-storey mansion, in the Cape Dutch style, surrounded by oak trees. There were also houses for his manager and foreman, and very nice cottages for his labourers. He had his own beach on the river, with changing cubicles and refreshment rooms. There were fancy gardens, orchards of apples, peaches, plums and pears, as well as vineyards and tree-lined avenues. It was altogether a most attractive place, a real country estate for a rich man.

But even a "nouveau farmer" like myself could see that as a business proposition it seemed hopeless. The books showed regular losses some years more, some years less. The owner had not worried about plugging in a few thousand pounds a year to cover the shortfall, but since his death the executors were keen to get rid of the farm.

They faced an additional snag, which was prohibitive with most buyers. The will stipulated that the widow had the right to live out her days in the mansion, with the estate paying fifteen pounds a month to whoever bought the farm. The lady was insistent on remaining in her home, so the poor executors could not give possession of the mansion as a package with the farm.

I looked at the situation differently from the other potential buyers. I had a house on my own farm, which was more than adequate for my needs. As the farms were to be merged, one homestead would be sufficient. The fifteen pounds would be an incidental income to show the family how clever I was, just as I had proved my brilliance by selling those trees. And I could use the lingering widow as a strong bargaining point in the negotiations to force down the price.

I shall never forget the day I clinched the deal. It was a Saturday morning. I went to the office of the executors in Cape Town, accompanied by one of my wife's uncles, the most determined of the many would-be partners. As we went into the office he said suddenly, "Don't sign today! It's Saturday, and we shouldn't write on the Sabbath. Let's give it further consideration until Monday."

I am the most tolerant of men. Everyone is entitled to his opinion, and some people are very strict about observing the Sabbath. But I don't like a man who doesn't know where he is in life. Why make an appointment to go to the executor's office if we

were going to turn religious all of a sudden? "You do what you like," I said. "You are not the only partner who wants to come in with me. I came here to sign, and sign I will!"

So I entered the office alone, and put my signature on the Deed of Sale with a triumphant flourish. The executor asked for a deposit of two hundred and fifty pounds, with the balance payable against transfer. I was perfectly happy with this, wrote him a cheque, shook hands, and left the office the owner of two substantial farms, for which I had paid two hundred and fifty pounds. Of course, I had been paid two thousand pounds by the bank, so I was still one thousand, seven hundred and fifty pounds to the good! "Now, that's the sort of business I'll do any day!" I exulted, as I thought about the suddenly Sabbatical relation.

That night was also one of rejoicing for another reason. The radio announced that the Allies had invaded North Africa. The end of the war, and the return from the front of the South African boys - including my eldest son and several of my nephews seemed to be in sight. I drank and celebrated both the victory and the purchase, feeling on top of the world.

But the next day I discovered that victory had her sting. What had become of all my partners and my glories? No more Allied convoys coming around the Cape of Good Hope to buy foodstuffs to feed the armies! No more war prosperity for the farmers! Down toppled the values of farms in the Cape, as fast as the hopes of Rommel in the North.

My partners disappeared, leaving me to hold the baby. And it was some baby despite the liberal credits I commanded - I doubted whether I could feed it. Shaking his wise old head, the uncle blandly said, ""I warned you not to sign on the Sabbath!" So, I thought bitterly, the Lord has pushed Eisenhower and Roosevelt into giving the order for the invasion, just to teach a simple Jew not to write on deeds of sale on Saturdays! Well, I was so much in favour of peace and of victory over the Nazis, that I was delighted to think that my headaches were giving the Axis theirs. If the campaign was arranged from on high just to teach me a lesson, then I was a willing scapegoat.

Of course, my poor wife saw ruin staring us in the face. Her poor children would starve: she had begged me not to become a farmer; the Messenger of the Court was coming for the piano! it was a sad day when she met me in the boarding-house and so on.

I kept perfectly calm. I was sure that I would overcome this new setback. To get out of the deal was impossible. The executors very decently gave me an extension of a few months in order to raise the purchase price. Two relations were kind enough to sign as guarantors. It seemed as if the highest mortgage I could obtain was a third of the price - banks were no longer giving people two thousand extra, over and above the full cost. A friend of mine, by a stroke of luck, found me a bond for 65% of the money I needed. Between overdrafts and other loans from various sources I raised the cash.

Naturally, I also started looking around for buyers - mugs like myself! But in the meanwhile I started to work my two farms as one combined unit. It proved too much for my manager, who gave me notice that he was leaving. I began spending more and more of my time on the farm, trying to hurry the crops along so as to get them to market to help meet the mortgage. It seemed as if I was sweating harder than any of my labourers!

The money was flowing out fast - labourer's wages, cattle fodder, poultry feed, manure, spray for the trees. As a cheque-book farmer, I was blistering my hands working. But at long last came the great day, the harvest of my first crop: early peaches for export. I spent the day on tenterhooks, fretfully watching the work. It was some procedure, especially compared to the streamlined techniques I have since seen in Israel. The labourers went out in pairs, one carrying a tray, one a ladder. The climber would search for a ripe peach, pull it off, and pass it down. The system went only slightly quicker than a snail walking. When the trays were full, they were taken to the packing-house. One third were rejected at once as unfit for consumption, and sent to the pigs.

Even worse was the harvest of the pears. The trees had a tremendous crop; they were literally weighed down by the heavy fruit. Here, I told myself gleefully, is the big money, the cash I need so badly! The picking went much quicker than that of the peaches. Load after load was collected by lorry and brought to the packing-house.

I began to think that the pigs had their agents among the workers sixty percent of the pears were consigned contemptuously to the sty! The rest were thrown into a big tank, filled with dilute hydrochloric acid, to be washed, Then they were taken out and rinsed, and the coloured women would start looking for spots and signs of codling moth. More pears for the pigs! What pears remained were sorted according to size.

Eventually, all that was left of my magnificent dream were forty boxes, which we railed to the pre-cooling store at the docks. The next morning I received a message: "Consignment rejected unfit for export excess of fifteen percent codling moth."

I kept as calm as the circumstances permitted - that is, I did not suffer an apoplectic stroke. I went to my manager, and said to him, "I am a reasonable man, a calm and tolerant and understanding man. I have signed cheques cheerfully without knowing where the bank would find the money to meet them. The cost of spraying those pears, which the pigs are enjoying so much, went into hundreds of pounds. I like pigs, and wish them to have nothing but the very best but I won't go bankrupt just to please them!"

Then I took a bold step. Sometimes I can dilly-dally for months, driving everybody crazy, before making a decision, but generally I know my own mind and want quick action. "Get a contractor," I said, "and get rid of all these damned fruit trees!"

It made a big dent in both my bank balance and my visions of the farm paying for itself, but later this decision paid good dividends. Where those internal pears had kept the moths happy, I laid out trellis after trellis of the finest export vines. I also pulled out about a hundred apple trees - they had needed a much colder climate.

Things looked pretty black for a while, and sometimes I even found myself on the verge of agreeing with my wife! But I kept a smile on my face- a despondent boss is a worse blight than a codling moth. By now, my manager had left, so I placed an advertisement in the papers for both a manager and a foreman.

One of the applicants was an elderly man from a nearby village. He walked out to the farm, accompanied by two children, all ready to move in.

"Have you had any farming experience?" I asked. "No," he replied.

"Any references?"

"None, I'm afraid."

"Why do you think yourself qualified for the position?"

"I am an expert student of men, came the grave reply. "I am a psychologist. Trees and animals are easier to understand than human beings."

But he did not understand me. He was amazed and angry when I did not give him the job.

Even experts on human nature of which I am naturally one can occasionally make mistakes. One afternoon two jolly young men arrived in a car, having had a few drinks on the way. They told me that one of them wanted the job.

"Which one?" I demanded.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," they waved magnanimously. "Whoever you like!"

All my Scots training and my Jewish blood revolted at that drunken irresponsibility. I showed them the door, and ordered them out at once. Some years later, one became general manager of one of the largest commercial farms in the Cape, and the other made a great success in farming on his own account! Sometimes men can be good farmers although they are addicted to the products of the grapes they grow.

Eventually, I selected a new manager and foreman, who happened, by coincidence, to know each other. They had worked together for several years, a long time before, as manager and foreman of a large farm.

The manager seemed to be the answer to my prayers. Although Jewish, he was a pipe-smoking British colonial type, a "pukka Sahib". He had been to England and spoke with a most impressive accent from behind his pipe and walking-stick. He had graduated from an agricultural college, and had had years of practical experience in addition to his theoretical training.

"He's going to be our saviour!" I told my wife, jubilantly. I should have guessed that something was wrong when she agreed with me!

## CHAPTER XXI<sup>49</sup>

My gentleman manager received a very good salary, plus the promise of commission on sales. I was prepared to give him a partnership if he made good. We were full of plans and schemes, and decided to make our fortune quickly - always the most pleasant way.

We went in for "cash catch crops" vegetable farming between the wide rows of vines and young fruit trees, providing an immediate return while the really lucrative trees were growing. The prospects and estimates looked marvellous on paper. We had many happy evenings during which, over the kitchen table, we calculated our inevitable profits.

Our system of operations had the manager giving orders to the foreman, who handled the labourers and executed instructions. Things began to hum on the farm. I was getting terrible cramp in the wrist from signing cheques, but the workers were straining their backs on my behalf, so it was a fair division of labour. I was optimistic and enthusiastic, and disregarded my wife's forebodings.

The I began to notice, with a sinking feeling in my stomach, that something seemed to be going wrong with the growing crops rather, with the non-growing crops. I did not know much about farming, but it was apparent that all was not well on the farm. Friends and neighbours looked darkly sagacious, and dropped hints from the corners of their mouths. But, when I tackled the manager, he intimidated me with his knowledge, and told me to have patience. When the crops did not appear above ground, I suggested that we needed expert advice. He was mortally offended. "Aren't you satisfied?" he demanded. "Don't you think I know what I'm doing?" That response kept me quiet for a little while longer, but it didn't bring up those lazy crops. Finally I realised that I could not let things drift along any longer even if I were to risk my good relations with my impressive manager, I had to find out what was wrong.

So I jumped into my car and drove off to the nearby Elsenberg School of Agriculture. I was taken into the office of the principal, a kindly old gentleman who gave me a sympathetic hearing. "Don't worry," he said, to soothe my obvious anxiety. "Tomorrow I'll send you two of my best men."

They arrived the following day. My disgruntled manager was not that pleased to see them, as he considered I had gone behind his back. After a cup of coffee, we set out for the lands: the two experts, the manager with his walking stick, a young coloured lad carrying a bag and a spade, and me. It was a bitterly cold winter's morning, which even my manager's anger could not heat. Those two experts condemned everything about the farm. Wrong manure: planting too late: incorrect varieties: young plants too thick: insufficient weeding. Arguments between them and my manager grew faster than my poor carrots. We spent the whole morning going through field after field, looking for a single good crop, like Diogenes searching for an honest man and with no better results.

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<sup>49</sup> For the details of the court case mentioned in this chapter see the appendix

We returned to the homestead, tired and miserable, for a good lunch. Then the experts left, promising to send us a full written report with the next mail. That report was to lead to my great Supreme Court case. I read it through when it arrived, then put it in my pocket, and waited until after lunch before producing it for discussion with my gentleman manager. We sat in armchairs, next to a fine big fire in the lounge. Outside the homestead it was a miserable Cape winter's day, with the rain beating down from black skies.

The manager read the report carefully while drinking his tea, and then looked up at me in his customary placid manner, from behind his smoke-screen. I was perfectly calm, not the least bit angry or excited. "Well?" I asked, more in sorrow than in anger. "What do you say now?"

"I don't agree with them," he answered with complete self-assurance. "I know as much as they do, if not more. There will be good crops just have patience."

Despite my prided self-control and complete lack of animosity, I could not restrain myself any longer. Rather loudly, but of course without anger, I said, "You are dismissed! Get out of here now, before the sun sets today. I never want to see your face again!"

He gave me one long gentlemanly look of reproach, like a wronged St. Bernard ordered out of its comfortable place by the fireside, and strode out of the room. A little while later, the foreman came to plead with me to allow the manager to sleep over until the morning, to which I agreed.

To this day I do not know why he made such a mess of the lands. He certainly was not ignorant of farming, but perhaps he did not understand the particular soil or the climate. Early the next morning he left the farm, stick in hand and pipe in mouth until the end.

Only it was not the end, not by a long sight. He sued me in court for wrongful dismissal, breach of promise regarding partnership, and all sorts of horrid things. Naturally, my wife and many other family members had the gloomy pleasure of assuring me that they had told me so, they had warned me, and so on and so forth. It did not help to remind my wife that she, too, had admired that accent.

Meanwhile, during the time that the wheels of the law were turning slowly towards their conclusion, I had other troubles. The foreman came to me, very serious and upset. "Since my manager's gone, I go also!" he said.

I told him not to be foolish. I had nothing against him personally. As the foreman, he had simply carried out the instructions given to him.

"Look here," I said. "I'm going to make you a surprising proposal. I'm not going to advertise again for new staff. From now on, you're the manager. I'll double your salary at once, and in addition I'll pay you commission."

"And what about a foreman?" he enquired.

"I'm your foreman," I answered. "You're the boss. Let's get this farm straight."

He was deeply moved, and promised to do his utmost, I don't know what prompted me to take this extraordinary step without giving it further thought. He was an Afrikaner, an elderly bachelor honest, simple, and devoted to the land. He made no secret of being anti-British and anti-liberal; I suspected that he was possibly anti-Semitic as well. But frankly, I didn't care about his "antis" - he was pro-farm. After the Oxford English in front of the fire, I felt like hearing some homely Afrikaans. The Afrikaners have a deep and profound love of the soil.

He proved to be loyal and capable. He admitted to me that he had not approved of what we had been doing, but had considered that it would have been disrespectful to his manager on his part to say so. What a queer idea of loyalty!

We actually got on together famously. Although I say it myself, I was a first-class foreman, and carried out all his orders with precision. A great believer in method and order, I carried round with me everywhere I went on the farm a little notebook with his orders written in, and saw to it that they were executed. I am still walking around with my notebook in Israel to this day. Now am my own manager, foreman and labourer apart from my farming notes, I record literary brain-waves as well.

We sold off the growing crops for what we could get and planted new crops. Potatoes yielded us twenty-one bags to one bag of seed, and we received a large order for carrots from a canning factory. All our crops were excellent. I even began to see a turn in the money tide it started to come in as well as go out. My manager's commission account grew fatter and my spirits were soaring.

One evening he said to me, "I appreciate the square deal you are giving me, but I am putting in a lot of development work which does not show in immediate profits, so it doesn't pay commission. New planting, and so on."

I thought that he was quite right. "I agree," I said. "From now on we'll fix the value of the farm each year, quite apart from the profits. We'll take in the young vines and the trees which are not yet yielding. You'll get five per cent of the added value each year. Are you satisfied?"

He was. So I am not really such a mean fellow as I make myself out to be.

One of the people who did not share my high opinion of myself, unfortunately, was the judge who tried the case between the manager and myself. It is all dead and forgotten now (the case is actually quoted in South African law books as an example of incompetence being grounds for dismissal of an employee) but I swear by all that I hold holy that I told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

In one previous unsuccessful brush with the law, way back in my early days in the Karroo, I had caused a notorious female character to be arrested for theft. The Magistrate then had believed her and disbelieved me. Perhaps I come across as a very poor witness, even when I tell the truth. Possibly I would have made a better impression had I told a few lies!

The judge said some very harsh things about me. In his judgement he stated the " ... the defendant ... was demonstrably untruthful, and seemed to me to give his evidence with little or no regard to the oath that he had taken. Usually very voluble

and positive, when in a corner he became hesitating and vague. He has an exceedingly (or conveniently) bad memory ... I found it wholly impossible to place any reliance upon the evidence of a witness of this kind ...."

My opponent, on the other hand, with his educated air, made an excellent impression. Whenever he could, the learned judge believed him, although it was not always easy in view of the realities of the situation. Fortunately for me, these were strongly in my favour.

Not all my weaknesses as a witness could destroy the value to me of the evidence of the two experts from the Elsenburg School, who obviously had no axe to grind and yet condemned my ex-manager's work in no polite fashion.

So the judge decided that the old school tie, while honest, had his weaknesses too. "I have already found a certain measure of casualness in regard to his own affairs in Plaintiff's make-up am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that Plaintiff was not competent for the job which he had undertaken ... it follows that Plaintiff must fail ... Plaintiff's claim was exaggerated there will be judgment for the Defendant ... the fairest order seems to me that there be no order as to costs..."

What angered me even more than the harsh terms about my veracity was the following expression used by the judge in his summation, concerning a proposal for a contract which I had drawn up: "... In any case, I am not at all satisfied that Defendant, who is obviously not well-educated, would be capable of producing this result in this casual manner

That last sentence hurt me more than the judge's erroneous decisions about my honesty. His mistake about my literary ability shows how mistaken he was in general. Considering that I probably knew more English literature than he did, and that I was regarded as the champion composition writer in school way back in Glasgow, the reflection hit me where I felt it most! I was so infuriated that I sent him a copy of my pamphlet on "Peace, Perfect Peace" but I never received so much as an acknowledgement, let alone a retraction. If he had not been a judge, he would have been a literary critic - he knew so little about style!

Mind you, he was a very fine man, and was considered by other South Africans to be a very able judge. I was convinced that if I had spoken with an Oxford accent instead of my mixture of "greener" English and Glasgow slum, he would have been as impressed with me as he was by the opposition.

On the other hand I must admit that even I, who consider myself such an excellent judge of human nature, had erred about my pipe-and-stick acquaintance. Hadn't I mistaken him for the Archangel Gabriel when he first appeared, like a vision of delight? To err is human, to forgive divine. I forgave the judge and did not take him to appeal.

The case cost me a pretty penny and, even worse, put me in the wrong and the family in the right but at least my actions saved my crops. I am a determined man, and learn slowly, I suppose. The final judgment had been an effort to reconcile the judge's rejection of my evidence with his acceptance of that of my two experts. But it



revealed to me for all time the utter failure of the litigation system to give the man on high any insight into the people in the witness box. Since then I have snubbed the Courts of Justice with the utmost coldness, apart from a vicarious interest in the law through my eldest son and my son-in-law, who are both attorneys. When I was living on a shilling a day in Johannesburg, I used to go to the Courts for drama instead of the theatre but I am now quite determined not to play a role in any more litigation. You never know if you're going to be a hero or a villain. If I want to gamble my money, I would rather do so where I have a sporting chance – like roulette or sweepstakes or the racetrack.

Not that I have ever been a gambler, of course. People who work as hard as I do seem to develop a fairly respectful attitude to money. The making of money for money's sake was always rather repugnant to me it certainly had no appeal. I have never worshipped money, but I have enjoyed making it. It was fun to pit my brains, energy and initiative against the world. One's work has to give a man pleasure and pride. Too much money can be a curse instead of a blessing.

I never consciously made money dishonestly. Jeremiah<sup>50</sup> put it rather neatly: "As the partridge sitteth on eggs and hatcheth them not; so he that gettest riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool." There are many instances where the old grumbling prophet proved correct with crooked company directors and so on who had their day of power but ended in prison.

If all my schemes had proved successful, I would have been a multi-millionaire; if they had all failed, I would have ended in the poorhouse. As it is, I have not done so badly, and I have had a great time hatching my complicated schemes to keep my nose ahead in the rat-race. I am deficient in certain vital attributes to be a success I am too gullible, too honest, and lack a spirit of greed. You perceive that I admit all my faults, as I am my own severest critic. No wonder people, even my own family, lacked faith in me as a director of companies.

That judge was a very mistaken man, and he should have admitted his error, at least about my literary style, once he received my pamphlet. There was no reason for him to be so obstinate. In all my studies of literature, going back through Shakespeare to the Bible and even the Greeks, I have been hard put to find a single flattering reference to the law. So I have suffered in good company.

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<sup>50</sup> Jeremiah 17:11

## CHAPTER XXII

When I was not struggling against the forces of injustice, I continued to serve myself as my own foreman. I left my business to my brother and my staff to run, which they did very nicely. My wife and family remained in Cape Town<sup>51</sup> and I concentrated on making good "sitting under my vine and under my fig-tree", as the Bible describes the life of the farmer. My wife declined to live on the farm, so I went home from Fridays to Mondays. Instead of being a weekend farmer, I was a weekend husband. I can't say that I did much "sitting" I had taken on a man-sized job.

At first, all the labourers who worked for us on the farm were from the Cape Coloured community that is, the descendants of mixed white and African parentage. I was horrified by the conditions under they lived. They lacked basic foods and many of the primary amenities of life. The better type of Cape Coloured went for work to the towns and cities. Only the most backward remained on the farms. I made up my mind to improve their standard of life, and proposed to my manager that we increase their pay by sixpence a day. He demurred, but could not prevent it. But rumour's of my plan spread through our area - perhaps they emanated from him and my telephone rang night and day, with angry neighbours demanding that I should not ruin farming in the valley. I had to abandon the idea.

Then I encouraged the workers, with the help of a subsidy, to develop a vegetable patch of their own, and keep a few chickens and pigs. Only a few took any advantage of my plan. Sadly, most of them preferred to lie down at sunset, often in their work clothes on a rough mattress thrown down on the floor, and to sleep or drink their lives away.

I tried to break the tot system, which I loathed as a pernicious evil. This system involved supplying the workers every few hours with some wine, amounting in all to six or eight tots a day. As soon as the bell rang at daybreak they used to hurry to the depot for the first tot. They would drink it with relish, smacking their lips as they passed the container around. The liquor heated their empty bellies and raised their spirits. I once tasted it - a cheap fiery drink costing about a shilling a gallon.

There was always a controversy raging about the tot system. Naturally, I was on the side of reform. I tried abolishing it by giving the men sixpence in lieu of liquor, with payment being made at the end of the week. My manager warned me that my reform idea would not work.

Sure enough, it failed. They were so used to their daily tots that they could drink their daily measure without becoming unpleasantly drunk. Being denied liquor the whole week, they developed a crazed thirst by Saturday. They would rush off with empty sugar sacks to the nearest bar to fill them with bottles of liquor, which cost them nine pence each. Some of them used to walk six miles to the bar. They would make up a

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<sup>51</sup> They lived at Hargil, Rhodes Avenue, Mowbray, Cape Town

week's thirst in one go often they were blind drunk on the road, long before they even reached home.

Furthermore, the drunkenness led to quarrels, fights and all sorts of other crimes. It is harder to change a custom, good or bad, that may corrupt the world, than to invent a hydrogen bomb to blow it up.

Since leaving South Africa I have heard that working conditions among the Cape Coloureds have improved as a result of competition for labour. I very much hope that this is the case. I also have heard that the tot system is as vigorous as ever.

In 1943 we received a new type of labourer the Italian prisoner-of-war. Hundreds of thousands of Italians had been captured by the Allies in North Africa. They were harmless and not unattractive, utterly unlike the Nazis. Looking at these sheepish men, I remembered Mussolini threatening the world with his "eight million bayonets". I am firmly convinced that in the long run righteousness does triumph, but it can be a very long time until it does. Perhaps one shouldn't believe that right must win automatically, merely because it is right.

The acquittal of Dreyfus, the overthrow of Hitler, the creation of the Jewish State they were all examples of virtue triumphant. But what an effort was needed! Similarly, I don't think it helps to pray to God to get something for you, unless at the same time you work your heart out to get it. I do know that prayers without the effort are just a waste of your breath and God's time.

The first group of Italian P.O.W.'s we received consisted of a group of ten, of whom nine were workers and the tenth was a supervisor. We had to provide them with food, drink, cigarettes, clothes, lodging and a shilling a day in cash. We bought beds and mattresses and put them up in one of the big store-houses.

They were treated very liberally as regards food. I had to buy macaroni and spaghetti, olive oil and tomato juice, in terrific quantities. They proved to be excellent workmen, far superior to the Cape Coloureds. Some had come from wealthy and aristocratic homes, but of course we treated them all alike. In 1945, they were all freed.

The end of the war, which brought so much happiness to the world, also produced a boom in the export of grapes and other Cape fruits to Britain. For six drab years the British people had been having a very thin time, in more ways than one, and they were anxious to make up for it, like my workers when I denied them their tots.

All through the years I kept trying to sell the farms. I had only gone in for agriculture as a tax-saving device, although it had enslaved me even more than the receiver of Revenue ever had. Instead of the farms soaking up my excess profits, they were now taking up all my time, energy and money, apart from exposing me to the suffering of being proved in the wrong in family discussions.

I was prepared to accept any reasonable offer, even a small loss, if I could get rid of my "tar baby". At first I tried to sell through agents, but there was nothing doing. Then I was persuaded to put the farms up for public auction.

The morning of the sale dawned. From daybreak onwards the motor cars started to arrive, bearing all kinds of registrations. They came from the big city, the smaller towns and the surrounding farms. Looking at all the cars, one would have thought that it was some great sporting event. The crowds roamed around like ants. Naturally, the auctioneer and I were delighted. We anticipated keen competition and a successful sale.

When the time came for the sale, most of the people formed themselves into little groups, talking amongst themselves, discussing the bids they were going to make, the syndicates they would form. They were full of plans, hopes and dreams, all at the expense of my own.

Some of the people I knew personally, but I was in a grim and determined mood, and spoke to nobody. Like Hamlet in the play scene, I was watching and waiting to see my fate determined.

At ten o'clock the auctioneer put up the first farm. Bidding was low. The highest price reached was forty percent below what I had paid. Then the second farm was offered, with the same result. Then we came to the real test the sale of the two farms together.

The price quickly reached half the total cost to me. Then the bidding advanced at a snail's pace. The auctioneer was shouting himself hoarse. After each bid the groups would have long discussions among themselves. Every ten minutes or so the auctioneer would drag them up another fifty pounds.

My blood was going from the simmer to the boil. Clearly these smart Alecks thought that it was a forced sale, and that I would give the farms away for any price. I made up my mind that, although I had sold songs when a boy in Glasgow, I was not going to sell my farms for a song in my middle age. I went up to the auctioneer and said in his ear, "Tell them all to go to Hell."

"Why, I'm very surprised," said the auctioneer. "How can you say such a thing in public?"

"Say it however you like, but get them off my farm. The sale is cancelled."

As soon as he made the announcement a hush came over the gathering, as in a Court case when a surprise verdict is given. For a moment the groups were stunned, all their dreams receding as mine returned with my headaches. Then they all started to clamour for explanations. Many of them crowded around me trying to interest me in further negotiations, but I had made up my mind that I was not selling to that particular bunch of blood-sucking "shrewdies" even if I went broke for it. Sometimes I think that the family may have a little right on their side when they say that I am too obstinate!

So, bang went the great auction, and back I went to foremaning under my own manager. But, at the same time we had agents working hard, like hounds on a hot scent after a quarry.

The first sale I effected was of three-quarters of my original farm. I could not find a buyer for the whole, so I cut off a quarter and sold the balance. The remaining quarter I added to the second farm the country estate. I was always full of ideas to get me out of my problems.

But with regard to the second farm I bumped into what seemed to be an insuperable stumbling-block. Originally, I had bargained down the price, very shrewdly, because the homestead was occupied by the widow of the deceased Englishman. This now prevented my selling the farm. I even went so far as to offer the widow a few thousand pounds to move to town. I described to her the innumerable delights of a luxurious flat or house in the great city. But, unlike my wife, she remained a convinced country girl, true to the home she had shared with her husband.

Time passed, and with it many buyers. I knew that I could get my price if only I could give possession of the mansion as well. I could see the potential buyers' point of view all right, as well as the widow's, but understanding the feelings of others did not sell the farm.

A certain farmer was very keen, and the estate agent kept on at both of us about it. I was becoming annoyed by this persistent customer, but nevertheless, when the agent telephoned me to come to his office for yet another meeting, I went along, and asked if the buyer still made possession of the homestead a condition of sale. When he replied: "Yes!" I answered, rather ungraciously, "Then why do you waste my time?"

I rose to leave but, like a flash of lightning, was suddenly struck by one of my great inspirations like "A Shilling A Week". I turned around and said, in wild excitement, "Look here, my friend, why the devil does it have to be that particular building? It's not so wonderful, not modern or up-to-date. I'll make you a sporting proposition. You've got acres and acres of land build yourself a brand new house, the mansion of your dreams! Have a beautiful modern home instead of that miserable, gloomy old fortress. Let the poor widow finish her days in peace, paying you fifteen pounds a month in rent that's a return equivalent to six percent on three thousand pounds. I'll give you five hundred pounds towards your new home, and we'll clinch the deal here and now!"

Have you seen the sunrise suddenly shine from above a bank of clouds? Have you heard a cheerful bird sing to its mate? What metaphors of happiness can you bring to mind to describe that buyer and estate agent? All I needed all those years was that simple idea! Within five minutes we signed the Deed of Sale, and sent out for some bottles of champagne.

So it goes to show all's well that's ends well. The Afrikaners have a saying: "Agteros kom ook in die kraal" even the last ox (that is, on the team) reaches the corral. In other words, hold on and you'll win through.

But how much heartache I would have saved myself if only I had my great inspiration years before! How many "I told you so" lectures from my family might I have escaped!

Yet, in a way, it was lucky that I had not had the brain-wave earlier. The price had risen 135 per cent above the price agreed upon between my manager and myself, when I had promised to pay him commission on increased value. He cleared a nice fat commission, and he had well-earned it I did not begrudge it to him. I am not such a hog for money as I have made myself out to be, although I do appreciate its value I suppose because in my youth I had committed that dreadful sin of poverty and made up my mind to sin no more.

One of my daughters,<sup>52</sup> graduated from the University as an expert on arts and economics, has said to me about a proposed holiday trip or new car: "Terrible thing, so you'll leave a thousand pounds less to us when you die!" She doesn't understand the almost mystic reverence a one-time pauper has for capital. As long as you spend only income you're all right. But when you take out of capital you waste not only the money but its future income. No farmer in his right senses would kill a pregnant cow. But just try to explain that simple proposition to the modern generation!

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<sup>52</sup> Harriet

## CHAPTER XXIII

So ended my six years of farming. They had been years of tear and regret, of confidence and joy. I had gone into it so lightly, just to chip thirteen shillings off the pound of my income tax. I had ended up with a lost court case, and my reputation for sagacity gravely endangered. My wife, my brothers, my sisters, and all the rest of our large extended family had nearly had the goods on me. had heard sorrowful warnings from all directions. Well, I had the last laugh, although only just.

I had no regrets. Did not the Psalmist declare that he who sows in tears shall reap in joy?

I was in a magnanimous mood. The hateful war was at an end, with Hitlerism destroyed and my eldest son safely home from the battle-front. I had eventually made a success of my farming ventures. I could forgive everyone, except possibly that judge for his mean comments on my style. One can overdo forgiveness at 50!

"Well," said my wife happily, "thank Heaven we've finished with this farming business."

"No, my dear," I told her gently. "I am buying others."

The poor woman nearly had a heart attack on the spot, and I could not blame her. "What do you mean?" she cried.

"Surely," I said, "you don't think that I'm going to waste all this painfully-acquired experience?"

The truth was that I was bored by the prospect of returning to the business. While I had been away on the farm, my brother Willie and my capable staff had proved to me conclusively that the business could run without me. What sort of a life was it for an energetic man like me, just to sit in a shop and gloat over my ledgers? Was this what a man was born for, just to make money?

So, within two weeks I was the owner of another farm not as large as the others, only 86 acres. This I bought with a vengeance. I paid the full purchase price in cash, out of my own pocket. This was the first time I had ever done such a thing. It was a breach of my most cherished principles, not to mention a hole in my principal. But it was a lovely little farm, worth every penny of the money. By that time, of course, I considered myself one of the most expert farmers in the Western Cape Province!

Another week went by, and I bought a second farm, in rather curious circumstances. I made a quick decision one Saturday. Perversely, Saturday always seems to be my day of decision.

I had arranged for my manager and tractorist, from the old farm, to come across to inspect the newly purchased one. This tractorist was an Afrikaner, of the type known as a "poor white". On the old farm he and his family had had their own house. But on the new farm there was only one homestead. That Saturday morning, when we were drinking coffee, the manager suddenly asked me if the tractorist was coming with us to share the homestead. "Certainly!" I replied. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't come with you, then. I won't stay in the same house as those poor whites!" There was a great

principle involved here, I felt. I was against discrimination in all forms. It was bad enough that there was anti-colour and anti-Jewish sentiment in the world. I was not going to be a party to Afrikaners turning on each other, and bluntly told the manager that I was not prepared to indulge his prejudices. He just got up and left the room.

He remained adamant, and so did I. In the evening he came to me and said, "If I leave, will you help me to buy a small farm for myself?"

"Certainly," I replied, mindful of the happy years we had worked together. "Come, let's see what's advertised."

He took his Afrikaans newspaper, and I the English one. We studied all the advertisements, compared notes, and eventually agreed on one that seemed to be ideal for his purpose.

I rang up the agent right away, as there was no point in wasting time. But he was one of those men who nurse their weekends, although I do not know what for. Anyway, we were only able to go out to see the farm on the following Monday. It was a waste of two valuable days in our lives!

The farm was a beauty, a real gem of a farm, one of those peaceful, fruitful little farms in the Fransch Hoek district. It was only fifty acres, but every acre perfect. My ex-manager looked positively stupefied with bliss. We agreed on the price and the terms half cash and half mortgage.

I asked my friend the ex-manager if he liked it. He could only nod his head, in silence. "Well," I said, "you have become a property owner. It's yours you're the boss."

"No!" he replied, with tears in his eyes. It was strange to see a man crying about such things. "I won't part from you. You have been my lucky star. All you do is successful. Alone I would be a failure. You must be my partner."

So I had to go home and report that I had bought another half a farm. Explain to a woman how you can sack a man one moment because of his prejudices, and then go into partnership with him the next! My wife has never been able to comprehend my system of principles.



## CHAPTER XXIV

All this time, while I had been busy establishing myself in business and farming, the children had been growing up from babies into youths. My wife and I had started, as you may remember, with a couple ready-made, so to speak, from our previous marriages. To them we added another three, custom-built Aubrey, Gillian and Meyer.

I have already said that those middle years of a man's life are the year's which the locusts eat. Somehow time disappears while he battles to make a living and raise a family. I barely looked around to see how the children were getting on, and lo and behold – I already had two at the University!

So I felt that life was passing me by. I had every reason to be satisfied with my efforts, and yet I was restless and discontented. What was I, I asked myself: a vegetable, no better than those I grew on the farm, drifting from seed stage through ripeness to the eventual market? Did I have to resign myself to the gradual onslaught of old age? I was still, by my own calculation, a young man only fifty-five, but what lay ahead?

I knew that there were some who considered me to be approaching the time for retirement, puffing a quiet pipe in the corner, surrounded by my grandchildren. But that was not my idea of how I wanted to walk off the stage.

I had always had an immense admiration for that great man who arose among the Jewish people Theodor Herzl, who realised the need for a Jewish Homeland. After trying the path of assimilation he saw that it led only to the Dreyfus case. He managed to stir up the Jews from my original corner of the world, the Russian Empire; but the smug, fat, contented Jews of the West remained cold to him and his great vision. In 1896 he could have bought the whole of what was then called Palestine for a bagatelle, a mere six million pounds but the stiff-necked Jews of that day did not support him, and we have had to pay in six million lives instead of pounds, apart from uncounted millions in cash since then.

When Hitlerism arose in all its filth, the Jews of Europe might have emigrated in masses to Palestine; they elected to make the shorter trip to the concentration camps. They deluded themselves with absurd false comfort that it was only temporary, that somehow or other it would all turn out right. Many of those who "hearkened not unto Moses", who opposed Herzl in fear that he would endanger their positions as citizens of Europe, lost the chance of survival. I claim to be a citizen of the world, a simple man, rejecting nobody because of race, creed, colour or religion, but I am a realist, and I know that not everybody shares my tolerance.

If they had only listened to Herzl, there might have been no Hitler and even if there were, a Jewish State would have found the means to save millions, just as it was to rescue Jews in their tens of thousands. But Herzl met with one disappointment after another. His famous diary is a record of suffering, his home life was sacrificed in vain, he suffered the fate of every prophet in his own country. Prophet indeed - "If you will it," he said in 1897, "it is no dream...the Jewish State will exist in 50 years." In 1947 the United Nations recognised the need and the right of Israel to exist.

The birth of Israel moved me intensely, and I experienced a profound excitement. The mixed and tangled racial problems of South Africa were growing more acute every year. The forces of intolerance became stronger all the time. It was impossible for a man of good-will to do anything to help the people who happened to have skins of the wrong colour. I believed, also, that intolerance was indivisible: what were the prospects of the Jews, a "foreign element" in South Africa, being allowed to grow fat forever on sufferance? How much would our money help us? How much had it helped the Jews of Germany?

One day, around 1940, I witnessed an unforgettable scene, while standing at a suburban station waiting for a train. On the track a number of African convicts, dressed in their skimpy prison uniforms, were working under the control of a warder armed with a rifle. Those were the days of the great German victories, with France having fallen, and it seemed possible that the Nazi tide would roll down Africa. It did not require much imagination to guess what that would mean for us - liquidation. And even without the German Nazis, there would be plenty of South African sympathisers ready to destroy the Jews, to reduce them to the slave level of the convicts I was watching.

Then and there, I took a great oath: no gas chamber for me. I would rather throw myself under one of the passing trains. The picture of Hitler standing on top of the Eiffel Tower, screaming with delight, made me shiver. At that time Israel did not exist, as it was still Palestine, under foreign rule. But the idea of emigration, I think, was born when I saw those convicts.

All my children grew up to be convinced Zionists, and were determined to settle in Israel. When the Jewish War of Independence started, my oldest son, Lionel, who had volunteered, together with several of his cousins, for active duty in World War II, joined the Jewish Foreign Legion. I was very excited when he left to serve our people. After the war was won, he returned to South Africa to practise as a lawyer. But both of my daughters Harriet, the older one, together with her husband Sam and daughter Miriam<sup>53</sup>, and the younger, Gillian, on her own emigrated to Israel; and my middle son, Aubrey<sup>54</sup>, left as well, to join a kibbutz in the Galilee. Naturally all of this made me more determined than ever to emigrate and to try my luck as a pioneer in the new State. As the months passed, I felt more and more restless. But I was so bound down by my assets and my responsibilities that I could not lightly leave one country for another, as I had done 37 years before, arriving in South Africa carrying only one suitcase. Thirty-seven years! I had married twice and raised five children, and succeeded fairly well both as a businessman and a farmer but was this to be all? To spend the rest of my days in the slothful ease of Cape Town? Was this the final chapter for my restless spirit?

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<sup>53</sup> Harriet Reeve Rabinowitz (191 – 2010) married Samuel Myer Levin (1915 – 2007) in Cape Town on 27 February 1942. Miriam was born in Cape Town in 1947. Gillian Deborah Hodes (1930 – 1976) married Yitzhak Winkler (1927 – 2003) in Tel Aviv, Israel in October 1956

<sup>54</sup> Aubrey Hodes (1927 – 2013). He settled at Kibbutz Timorim

My wife and relatives, although keen Zionists themselves, naturally ridiculed any idea of my going to join the children in the Holy Land. But in my thoughts I was already identified with the rebirth of the Jewish State.

Once, at a fashionable wedding, I was holding forth to my friends about the new State of Israel. I am perhaps inclined to talk rather too loudly when I lay down my opinion, especially if I come up against any ill-informed opposition so my views spread for quite a radius around us, like ripples in a pond.

At one of the nearby tables sat an Israeli woman, on a visit to her brother. "That man is obviously an Israeli," she said to her brother. "I can tell from the way he's talking." She got up and came across to introduce herself.

"I'm also from Israel," she said. "From what part do you come?"

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I've never seen Israel but I'm going to settle there soon."

"Astonishing! You talk like a person who really feels the life of the country!" Perhaps it was this brief conversation that finally clinched the matter for me. At any rate, I made up my mind, once and for all, that my wife and I should go to join our children.

My children and grand-daughter being in Israel made my wife's opposition to my plans much less vigorous than usual. In fact, it was probably just formally for the record that she stated her objection to the idea of emigrating to the Promised Land. But my brothers, my sisters, and my friends! I must have been told by them a thousand times that I was "meshuga"! Yet they were all, strangely enough, enthusiastic Zionists; they contributed handsomely to Zionist funds (as did all South Africans) and were passionately eager for others to build up the Jewish Homeland. For myself, have never believed in letting my job be done by the other fellow, just because there may be more thorns than roses.

But what fantastic thought and preparation were required for the Exodus of my wife and myself, in the footsteps of our ancestors! I doubt whether Moses had more trouble moving all the tribes of Israel than I faced in moving our household. And all this trouble was because I had become "comfortable" in my middle years how much less discomfort I suffered when all my worldly goods were in one suitcase or on my back.

I had so many assets, so cunningly varied, that I was in danger of being a slave to them. Owing to the currency restrictions then in force in South Africa, I had to leave the bulk of my estate behind. Otherwise, I wanted to sell up lock, stock and barrel. My farming interests I sold at a fat profit by giving long-term mortgages. It gave me a queer feeling to be on the bondholding side of a mortgage instead of the borrowing side! The house I let, furnished, to a Jewish widow who ran it as a boarding-house for University students - one of them our youngest child. The fixed property I rented out, to bring in a steady income.

The big problem was what to do with the business. As usual, I could not come to terms with the "shrewdies". I offered them fabulous bargains, but they thought they could pry something a little better out of my obvious need to get going. The main asset consisted of book debts. I was prepared to guarantee the accounts, one

hundred percent, for a year this meant that any debt not collected within that time would be paid by me. I asked for no goodwill, although this of course was a valuable invisible asset. I wanted the buyer to take over the stock and building at cost: ten thousand pounds in cash, the balance payable over eleven years at five percent. Can you imagine fairer or more reasonable terms? It wasn't a sale, it was a giveaway, a sacrifice on the altar of the Jewish State.

Do you think the boys would buy? Oh, no, they were too clever to take a gift. They thought that I was under compulsion, and started haggling and making impertinent propositions. They did not know the mettle of their man: although perhaps a simple sort of fellow, I was not going to let anyone make an ass of me. But for a while I was baffled.

I am a great believer in order and method, so I had all my terms and conditions clearly and attractively typed, and would hand a copy to a potential buyer on a "take it or go away and don't bother me" system. It did not help me much they still wasted my time. Some offered me fifteen shillings in the pound - these buyers I politely told to leave. To offers below that I said: "Get to hell out of here before I kick you out!" Yet, strangely enough, they came back for more of the same, fascinated by the illusion that they were close to pulling off a bargain. Was I despondent? Not at all - I remained calm, merely amused by the blindness of so-called smart businessmen. Then came another of my famous brain-waves, like "A SHILLING A WEEK", which had re-established my name, raised my family, and loaded me with the burdens of comparative prosperity. It came to me, strangely enough, while I was meditating in a little room next to the bathroom. I let out such a yell that my wife got the fright of her life she thought that something terrible had happened to me, I do not know what.

This was my plan, the germ of which came straight from the Bible: TEN PER CENT TITHES. Putting on my hat, I rushed out. In the street I met a would-be buyer, on his way to offer me another threepence in the pound. I laughed at him and said: "Sorry, you've missed the last bus."

Within ten minutes I was sitting with the proprietors of a large drapery store on the main road not far away from mine, which operated a similar business, but on a cash basis. As I outlined my plan, they cottoned onto it at - once the beautiful simplicity of it, the mutual benefit to both of us.

My idea was simply that I would not realise my business completely. I would dispose of the premises and stock, but would retain the book debts and goodwill, keeping my customers and selling to them by remote control. My new friends would supply them from their premises, but give them the same credit facilities as I had done for years. The risk would be borne by me, and I would receive ten percent on all sales. The amount of credit given to each customer would be regulated by a code known to the firm and myself. Each customer would carry a special pass-book, in which sales would be entered and counter-signed. The firm had to see that the customer's credit did not exceed the code figure, although I allowed a margin of twenty percent. The customer did not know his limit, of course, but the firm (acting as my agents) did. As far as the firm was concerned, they needed no extra staff or stock: they would

receive their profit, less my ten percent, doing practically nothing; in addition, my customers might very well become cash buyers of theirs.

That was the deal, and within half an hour it was fixed. it was a big task preparing new pass-books by the thousand, but it was worth it.

Most of my stock was sold off at cost, for cash; the rest was taken over by relatives, at fair prices naturally.

I may say that my system has worked marvellously well ever since. From my farm here in Israel, I still operate a fairly substantial credit business in South Africa. Every month the firm sends me lists of sales and purchases; at night I enter up my books. It gives me something to do as a diversion from farming. I know how much Smith or Cohen or Engelbrecht owes me in South Africa, and I send the firm their reports on which customers are not paying properly. Once a year, balances are audited and checked.

The system has the perfection of simplicity and brings in a very useful income, including, on behalf of my youngest son, Meyer<sup>55</sup>, the payment of his board, lodging, and education at the University of Cape Town Medical School.

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<sup>55</sup> Meyer Hodes (1934 – 2005)

## CHAPTER XXV

Two problems remained, to be attended to before I left South Africa. The first one was the novel one of having money (actually my own!) lying idle. The other was that, having transferred the headquarters of my business to the other firm, I had my premises standing empty.

My shop was on a side street, off the main road, so nobody wanted it. Naturally that set me to planning, like a hunted fox in a hole. I certainly cannot resist a challenge. After some thought, I decided to do something for the Cape Coloured people, to build them a place which they badly needed, and did not have anywhere in Cape Town - a modern, smart, cafe/restaurant.

There were several cheap and dirty eating-houses for that section of the community, but I saw no reason why they should not have something self-respecting, even deluxe, as good as the restaurants labelled "For Whites Only". I was vehemently against apartheid, of course, but even within the policy of separation (which was beginning to be formulated by the new Government) people who happened to have the wrong skin colour were given a raw deal. Why should I not, as a parting gesture, provide the Cape Coloureds with a decent place in which to gather, at the same time putting my empty premises to some use?

I went into the scheme very carefully. I discussed it with leaders of the Cape Coloured community; they thought that it was a marvellous proposition. They assured me that it would be well patronised and would prove to be a boon to the people. So I got busy. I had a contractor in, and completely changed the premises. I called it the COLORADO CAFE, and bought first-class chromium chairs and tables, a soda fountain, juke boxes, modern appliances for the kitchen. The chef and waitresses were coloured, but the manageress was an Afrikaner she had been one of my assistants in the shop. I put up a sign saying "No Europeans Admitted". On the opening afternoon I arranged that one of the leaders of the community would make a speech and would perform a stylish ceremony; I advertised "Free Refreshments!" I expected so many people that I engaged a commissionaire for the door and warned the police department to keep an eye on the crowd.

But only a handful showed up! Frankly, I was disgusted. My final business venture in South Africa seemed doomed to be a failure. The patronage continued to be poor. I tried all sorts of stunts free ice cream for children on Saturday afternoons, musical evenings with pianist and violinist, but nothing seemed to help. I spent a lot of time in the cafe, studying the patrons' reactions, but could not fathom what the problem was.

The cafe never became the revolutionary success socially, culturally or financially that I had anticipated so optimistically at the beginning. I could not compete with the local bars.

However, things did improve enough so that after four months the profits were sufficient to pay the management and some sort of rental for the premises and equipment.

By that time I had managed to arrange my other affairs according to my liking, so I handed over the "Colorado" to the manageress, giving her a long lease. Alas, the bad luck I seemed to have with managers persisted, and I heard later, after I was already living in Israel, that she had called it quits and given back the keys.

However, I had an extra card up my sleeve when I converted the premises into a cafe, I had taken the precaution of having the alterations comply with city council requirements for a factory. My agents sold up the cafe equipment and let the premises as a clothing factory, at a rental four times what I expected when I wanted to sell the business as a going concern. So even the "Colorado" did not end up altogether in the red, although I was sorry that my efforts to help those poor people to some of the pleasures in life had failed.

From my business I was left with a motley collection of goods and merchandise, that I was unable to sell. I threw away almost nothing, but packed seven huge lift vans and arrived in Israel with so much surplus stores that I am still using them, many years later. All the timber went into the farm and homestead where we now live. I still have the safe, showcases, stationery, string, wrapping paper, and numerous other odds and ends that I collected in the course of years in business. The showcases are used for planting. and growing seedlings!

All that was left behind were the wax dummies - twelve nude ladies. Somehow I did not think that they would integrate happily into pioneering Israel! Travelling is such a business in these modern times, compared to what it was like when we left Eastern Europe! Then all a person needed was the cost of his fare and the circulating twenty pounds in case the health authorities turned him down. Today, passports, visas, vaccinations, inoculations, certificates and Heaven only knows what else, it is harder to move from one country to another than it soon will be to get to the moon - unless they too have devised these ingenious ways of making modern travel so enjoyable.

Despite these irritants, you can imagine how thrilled and delighted we felt when the great day came and we set off from South Africa on the last stage in my pilgrimage. Even with a grand send-off, in the form of a farewell dinner at the Mowbray Town Hall, until the very last minute people in South Africa assured me that I was crazy. They insisted on describing for me in detail all the horrors and hardships ahead. Yet these Jews were Zionists, passionate supporters of Herzl and Weizmann! How did they reconcile their attitudes and their beliefs?

As we left Cape Town for Johannesburg to catch the plane to Israel<sup>56</sup>, I allowed myself a certain feeling of smugness and self-satisfaction. I remembered how I had arrived there, a "greener", utterly destitute and was now leaving as a man of substance, although with a reputation for being somewhat "meshuga". Nobody could deny that I had done something with my life in the course of the last forty years.

Then I put my self-satisfaction behind me, and my thoughts turned to the unknown life ahead. Would we make good, my wife and I, going at our age to a new land, notorious for its austerity and for the demands it made on its people?

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<sup>56</sup> Late 1950





## CHAPTER XXVI

If you have read my narrative so far, you will probably understand a little of my nature. I am always trying to plan something original not so much for the money I can make from the idea (although it helps) but for the spiritual satisfaction it provides. Some of my plans pass away leaving no trace, like light clouds under hot sunshine: some lead to success and an addition to the credit side of my balance-sheet.

My final South African plan was to take with me in the plane to Israel a hundred eggs - seventy-five Leghorns and twenty-five Australorps. I had heard about the terrible egg shortage in austerity-ridden Israel. But the eggs I planned to take were no ordinary eggs - they cost ten shillings apiece at one of the biggest poultry farms in the Western Province. At this farm they selected hens laying more than three hundred eggs a year (only a few qualified on this Stakhanovite productivity test!) and put them in a special camp together with cocks who came from equally distinguished families. In short, they were upgrade pedigree poultry.

As the owners of this famous farm were both amused and impressed by my intended assault on the Promised Land, they gave me their aristocratic eggs at a special price of only four shillings each. A special price is something I have never been able to resist. My planning was perfect, like a skilful military operation. The eggs were packed in cartons and handed to me on the train on my way from Cape Town to Johannesburg. From train to plane in Johannesburg was easy. I had already written to friends and family in Israel to have an incubator waiting.

I had worked it all out on paper. Say only seventy-five percent of the chickens hatched a low estimate for such famously fertile fowls. These would settle down to hard work in the new land and in no time my pioneers would have worked themselves up to a flock of a couple of thousand pedigree poultry. I imagined my advertisements "Fowls Guaranteed To Lay More Than 300 Eggs A Year" why, I would have the whole of Israel begging me to give them some of my golden eggs. And I would do it too, at a very low profit margin indeed, because my venture was inspired more by patriotism and a desire to help my new country than by any hope of getting rich quick.

Like all my great inspirations it soon became entangled in difficulties. In Johannesburg the Customs raised the most suspicious obstacles - they probably suspected that I had diamonds hidden inside those eggs. Apparently, I argued, I could carry the eggs inside my stomach if I ate them before my departure. Strangely enough, considering that they were customs officials, they saw the invincible logic of my arguments, and eventually the eggs were released to proceed on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Leaving the eggs in the plane's refrigerator for a moment. I must tell of a curious incident at Nairobi, which gave me a nasty jolt. On the plane I had noticed that some of the passengers were changing Israeli currency for South African. Naturally I was profoundly moved by my first sight of bank-notes printed in Hebrew, and eagerly changed my old South African notes for new Israeli ones, rather like Aladdin's wife with the lamps. You should know from my story that I am not a sentimental man, but

even I was moved to tears then by holding in my hand the symbols of the State of Israel, of which I had dreamed so long.

Like Aladdin's wife again, I had a rough awakening to reality. At the airport in Nairobi we all went to buy tins of coffee and pats of butter to take as presents to Israel. I did so as well but when I handed the seller my proud Israeli currency, he cried, "What are you trying to do? You know this isn't real money! What can you do with it?"

He wanted to take his goods back; I was determined to complain about his insolence. If necessary, I was going to hold the plane back until he was punished. The other passengers hastily contributed some sterling currency and persuaded me to allow the journey to proceed.

When we arrived at Lydda airport, we found our children and friends waiting to meet us but alas, there was no incubator! My friends said that there was not a single incubator available anywhere in the country - this was at a time when Israel was suffering from severe shortages of almost everything. But my nature would not allow me to take "Impossible for an answer. I set out immediately to track down some timid incubator that had gone into hiding. Eventually, through some outstandingly persistent detective work from my son-in-law, Sam Levin, we discovered an old widow, whose recently deceased husband had bequeathed to her a home-made contraption which he had termed his incubator. However, I was afraid to show my high-bred eggs (meanwhile quarantined in Israeli customs) their new quarters, after the mansions to which they were previously accustomed.

The widow was not interested in payment for her incubator in cash she wanted half the eggs, and I agreed on the spot. So my expectations of grandeur dropped to a thousand fowls.

The Israeli customs were as suspicious as the ones in Johannesburg, except that they thought I wanted to introduce all sorts of diseases by means of my eggs. Eventually, however, I had the incubator and I cleared the eggs. I went round with a Government official to collect the booty. He spoke no English, but egg after egg he pronounced "Met". Obviously he meant "Meat", I thought, and chuckled inwardly at his accent. Later on I discovered that "Met" was Hebrew for "dead"...

Of all those gallant emigrants, only sixteen hatched out, and eight went to the widow. Of my own eight, some were killed by rats, some died from heartache, and the one solitary cock who survived all vicissitudes we eventually ate this seems like base ingratitude, but what is life for a cock without hens to love. anyway? So my first Israeli venture literally went to pot. But, to tell you the truth, I was in such ecstasies about my new homeland that I forgave her one of my most notorious failures. We travelled all over the country and it exceeded my most optimistic dreams. So the currency was weak in Nairobi? Who counted?

My ideas about Israel had been subconsciously dominated by my knowledge of the British economists' reports on the limited absorptive capacity of the land. I had read Hope Simpson's statement that there was "no room in the country to swing a cat".<sup>57</sup>

As a result I was amazed to see hundreds of acres which had not been cultivated. And the cities like Tel Aviv quite took my breath away: Zionist propaganda had concentrated so much on the problems of the country that I did not expect to find so modern a town. Everybody we saw seemed to me to lead such full and happy lives, despite the shortages. Nor have I changed my mind to any great degree. Although I am a confirmed hater of national distinctions, I am firmly convinced that Israel is the only country in the world where Jews can let their hair down and develop their personalities to the full.

Naturally my wife, and all the people who had appointed themselves our advisers, assumed that we would buy a flat in Tel Aviv or Ramat Gan as soon as we had finished our touring. But I had other ideas. I had not come to Israel to eke out the rest of my days living on my income from abroad and crawling uselessly around the country's cities. I was determined to be a pioneer, to prove that things could grow where nothing grew before. Everybody laughed at me and said that I was too old. Too old? I made up my mind that I would show them that I was the youngest man in Israel, with the possible exception of Ben-Gurion of course!

Deep down inside me, I was longing for the feel of the land. I was thrilled and excited to see Jewish farmers, mechanics and labourers, disproving the old idea that Jews could only peddle goods even if they did so on a large scale and called themselves wholesalers and importers. Many of the farmers in Israel could have had an easier time in the cities, but they preferred to stay on the land and earn their livelihood the hard way. I saw no reason why I could not do what so many others were doing, merely because I had a little more money and a few more years on my back.

Of course, I knew that we had to live near Tel Aviv, where my elder daughter Harriet and son-in-law Sam were settled, together with their children Miriam and the new arrival, Dovvie<sup>58</sup>. It was strange to find myself a grandfather at a time when I was embarking on the most exciting, gratifying and youthful adventure of my life.

I made enquiries about buying my way into one of the prosperous cooperative villages near Tel Aviv. The sort of farmer I wanted to become was different from the chequebook farmer who had taken to the land, way back in 1942, together with manager, foreman, and numerous employees, mostly as a legal means of reducing taxes. No farm in a cooperative settlement in Israel was certain to be harder on the back, although possibly easier on the nerves and conscience. There are several types of farming in Israel. There is ordinary private farming, cooperative farming, and communal farming. The private farmers are active mostly in citrus - this was obviously not what I wanted, either economically or spiritually. The kibbutz, as the communal farm is called, is a wonderful place where private property has been completely abolished and I was afraid that I was too old and too burdened with

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<sup>57</sup> Sir John Hope Simpson, "Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development", 1930

<sup>58</sup> Dov Levin born in Tel Aviv in 1950

possessions, to measure up to that high ideal. Even a moshav shitufi - a sort of compromise between cooperative and kibbutz was too demanding for my wife and myself. My ideal was a cooperative farm, near Tel Aviv where the farmers shared certain equipment like tractors, held their land in private, but bought and marketed cooperatively. I heard of a man who was a member of such a group, had tried to combine farming with bus-driving but had failed, and was now prepared to sell his interest in the settlement.

Relying on my own judgement, I satisfied myself that the soil was good. I would have over six acres of the Holy Land to put into production by my own work. It was a thrilling thought. The farm was somewhat smaller than those I had owned in South Africa, but then I would have less labour available to work it in fact, only my own. Indeed, my friends tried to put me off by saying, not that there was too little land, but that there was too much. When the members of the cooperative met me, they suggested gently that I would find six acres too difficult to handle at my age. "Don't worry about me," I told them. "I want exactly the same as everybody else."

I negotiated with the bus-driver, agreed on a price, and applied to the cooperative to take his place and his holdings. For it was not just a simple matter of buying his farm, as in South Africa; in Israel most of the farms are owned by groups in common or on a cooperative basis. The one hundred and forty families had to agree that they liked me sufficiently to accept me as a member. I had to appear for examination before a screening committee.

Later, I heard that there were two divergent points of view among the members. One group, the extreme ones, said that I was nothing but a bloated South African capitalist and that they should send me to hell. The other, more moderate, thought that it would be in the group's interest to milk the cow first.

They went on holding sessions in camera, debating whether I was a capitalist with ulterior motives trying to force my way into their Eden, or whether I was a good milker worth having on the farm until I had been milked dry. In the end, I was accepted by a small majority. When I heard later about the great dream of milking me. I said that a cow needed milking anyway, but that it had to receive as well as give. I was prepared, with all my heart, to give the settlement the benefit of my surplus funds but on a business basis.

Somehow or other I managed to reconcile my poor wife to my latest "meshuga"! At least this farm was near her children and grandchildren, and it was situated on the main highway, with easy access to the city she loved. She never looked deep into the future, as I did - she did not understand that a man's spirit hungers for land.

The soil on the farm was very good, and there was unlimited underground water. The land was worked very intensively, with yields enormous compared to those which I had known in South Africa. One hundred and forty families earned their living from an area that in the Western Cape Province would have supported the owner in luxury, his manager and foreman in comfort, and a dozen Coloured labourers in the most revolting poverty. For all the talk about how desperately poor Israel is, I would

say that the people of the cooperatives want for nothing. Israel is the richest poor country in the world.

Life in a cooperative is very pleasant and comfortable: the people enjoy a higher standard of living than agricultural workers in most parts of the world. They are culturally on a far higher level. They are neither rich nor poor, but comfortably off, middle-class. Naturally, they obtain their basic food cheap and fresh. They spend less money on clothes. But their major expenses are great: administration (with four men working full time on the cooperative's affairs); income tax; health insurance; all sorts of subtle additional taxes. People work very hard and scientifically, yet in some ways their production costs seem to me to be high compared to those in South Africa. Water is available, but very expensive.

The families on the farm tend to be small, so that there is no fund of abundant cheap labour on which to draw liberally. The cost of hired labour is very high.

The biggest headache is lack of capital. My personal belief is that the Israeli Government is at fault for not making long term, low interest loans available to farmers. This would be essential to any country wishing to establish its agriculture on healthy foundations. As it is, the farmers have to pay usurious rates for short term loans - men get very bitter when they calculate that a major slice of their hard dawn-to-dusk work is done to enrich the money-lender.

Perhaps I express these thoughts with such feeling because of my role as the cow. I kept my promise to provide milk, and established my own bank on the farm.

## CHAPTER XXVII

As a boy in Scotland I became a pocket Lipton by selling coffee. My property deals made me as good a man as a landed Duke. My "Shilling A Week" equated me to Woolworths. Well, in my old age I became a relative Rothschild.

This is how it happened. The farmers among whom I lived were chronically short of capital between harvests. Having accepted me as a degenerate capitalist, they expected me to provide the necessary sustenance to tide them over their bad times. Sometime after we settled in Israel I had to return to South Africa to attend to some of my affairs. I decided to kill an extra bird at the same time: I would approach my friends and relations, keen Zionists all of them, to set up a Farmers' Bank.

This boon to the farmers would give my worthy and devoted acquaintances a chance to make an imaginative and constructive contribution to building the Jewish State. I was prepared to guarantee the money personally.

Did I get any support or encouragement? Not at all - only cautious smiles and laughs of rejection.

I have always found unanimous opposition to my ideas from the people closest and dearest to me. Maybe they see a particularly foolish cast in my eye which escapes my own notice, or perhaps they are suspicious of my enthusiasm. Whatever the reason, I have only to make a brilliant proposal for the family to turn it down. One day I am going to catch them out by proposing some activity of which I disapprove intensely. Their "NO!" is almost automatic!

Admittedly, I did go broke over thirty years ago, but ever since then I have succeeded in most things I undertook. I don't say that I am a sort of Midas, turning everything I touch into golden sovereigns, but I am determined and honest and most imaginative. If I were my own relation I would gamble on myself without hesitation. In fact, in the end I was forced to do so....

A few friends have believed in me, with less reason or proof than those nearer to me. There was Sammy, the wholesaler who gave me my first suitcase full of goods; the shipper from England who gave me unlimited credit because he liked the way I did business: bank managers who trusted me. I made money for all of them. If they had known me as well as my relations did, perhaps they would not have trusted me with a shilling!

Anyway, it soon became clear that I would have to abandon my ambition to be a Rothschild<sup>59</sup> unless I was prepared to outrage my most fundamental principles by putting up the capital myself. To succeed in business one should provide the brains while others supply the capital. But the opposition of my family made me so determined to become a banker that I mobilised the capital myself. The South African Government helped by allowing me to transfer the funds.

In 1953 I made one final trip to South Africa to finalise my affairs, and came back to the moshav triumphant. Ten thousand pounds sterling became five times the amount

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<sup>59</sup> A European Jewish banking dynasty

in Israeli currency. My bank is unique. I have no office, no assistants, no expenses; my overheads total zero percent. My only customers are my fellow-farmers among whom I live. They are charged a flat nine percent per annum. I do my own bookkeeping at night, using the stationery brought to Israel in my lift-vans. Office hours are immediately after supper. If the borrowers receive a certain amount of hospitality when they call, I put that down to friendship and not to public relations, because I do not want to ruin my record of being the only bank in the world without an outlay.

Naturally, I have acquired a reputation on the moshav for being fabulously wealthy: it is not certain whether this is good or bad. On the one hand, I could get unlimited credit if I needed it, or if anyone other than myself had the ready money to give it. On the other hand, I am the last on the list to be repaid, since everybody believes that I do not need any cash! Often I have to deny myself things I would like to purchase because I have not got the money in hand to pay.

When I bewail the lack of confidence of my friends and relations in my honesty or acumen, I console myself by reflecting that even the great Theodore Herzl could not collect the six million pounds needed to buy Israel, could not find one hundred thousand pounds to support the formation of a Jewish National Bank. How much interest have the Jews of the world paid because of their disbelief in their leader! Instead of six million pounds, six million lives.... It is such a bitter thought that I forgive those who doubted in me.

But before starting to lend money to the settlers, I first had to convince them that I was genuine. They accepted me, but with considerable suspicion. Compared to the other farmers, I have an easy life. Although I work in my fields from dawn to sunset, in summer I take a siesta - the concession which old age must make to Nature. Once and for all I must say that I have never lost my first passion for Israel. I fell in love with my final homeland on the day I landed - "age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety". I sometimes think that a nation is like a fruit cake: ordinary citizens are like the risen dough, and the Herzls, Weizmanns and Ben-Gurions<sup>60</sup> are the currants which give it taste.

There may be better cakes for other men's tastes than Israel, but none that have so caught my fancy. I see Israel with all its faults. Perhaps I am deluded, but I will eat no other cake before I die.

It is nonsense to talk about national characteristics. Human nature is the same, in all places and at all times. But every nation must have its own home. I have lived in a country dedicated to anti-Semitism – Russia - and in two countries where it was legally unknown but present under the surface - England and South Africa.

It seems to me that anti-Semitism is a natural phenomenon, as old as history. Abraham felt it, so did Isaac. The Bible sums up benevolent anti-Semitism in the image of Abimelech who, after Isaac "became very great", says to him, "Go from us:

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<sup>60</sup> Theodore Herzl was an Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist and political activist who was the father of modern political Zionism; Chaim Weizmann was the first President of the State of Israel (amongst many other achievements) and David Ben-Gurion was Israel's first Prime Minister

for thou art much mightier than we."<sup>61</sup> Sometimes the pressure is by oppression, violence and murder, as it was in Moses's time in Egypt. The cycle - invitation to settle, accumulation of wealth, notice to quit is repeated with minor variations, again and again, through era after era. For the Jew it is a story of asylum in a friendly land, with resultant prosperity, followed by rejection.

Fortunately the Jews have found peace and comfort in their Bible, their tradition and their religion, and in their belief in the divine promise of the return to the Holy Land. Other oppressed nations perished because of persecution or assimilation, but Jews have paid a heavy price in blood and tears for their continued existence and their belief in the revival of their freedom. Notwithstanding the tolerance I usually found in Scotland and South Africa, I believe with Herzl that "the Jews carry the seeds of anti-Semitism in their suitcases." Today there is a remedy - one I took - although, between ourselves, some of the worst anti-Semites I know are Jews!

Seriously, I cannot describe how life changes for a Jew who becomes an Israeli. He does have problems in abundance, perhaps more to the square inch than any other country in the world. But gone are the feelings of having to be on guard, of having to watch his behaviour and that of other Jews, of maintaining a ceaseless vigilance in case he should be rejected as alien. All that is over in Israel - the Jew is in his own back yard, and can act as freely as he wishes, taking care only that he wins his wars with the Arabs.

One particular quality of the Israelis must have special mention: one never sees a drunkard. Liquor is sold freely in all grocery shops and cafes, at all hours of the day or night, but drunkenness, and the crimes springing from it, are unknown. One Saturday night I toured Tel Aviv with a friend, on the lookout for a drunken Israeli: along the crowded beachfront there were thousands of merry-makers, but not a single person under the influence.

A cynical friend, a believer in the drinker's doctrine that wine maketh a full man spiritually as well as physically, claims that we suffer from over-indulgence in sobriety. It is a vice which I am anxious not to deny.

I do not for a moment suggest that we Israelis are better than other people: that would be an outrage to my own basic beliefs. I know that we are not all idealists. The fulfilment of the Biblical prophecy about the ingathering of the exiles has brought to Israel refugees from the four corners of the earth, speaking a vast variety of languages and having a multitude of cultural backgrounds and outlooks.

Most of the immigrants came because they were driven out of the lands of their adoption. They face the hardship of a pioneering country severe enough for the most fervent idealists. Yet they are defending their new and ultimate homeland against their enemies, with fanatical courage and determination, to build a strong, democratic and egalitarian society.

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<sup>61</sup> Genessis 26:16



The sense of equality and unity is particularly dear to me; even in Scotland and South Africa I saw distinctions because of class or colour.

Israel may be a poor country in many respects, but in others it is rich indeed. There are the many unique forms of living, such as the kibbutz and the moshav, where cooperation between men and women reaches its heights. There is the strength of the labour organisation, democratically organised, and the high standard of social services. Although the country may have a harsh climate, with poor minerals and natural resources, it is well-endowed in invisible sources of wealth. The soil is rich, and the national revival inspires workers and scientists, farmers and statesmen, poets and philosophers. It is not just coincidence that this is the country which produced the Bible, for "the eyes of the Lord are constantly on this Land."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Deuteronomy 11:12

## CHAPTER XXVIII

Twenty-five dunams of irrigated land is a fair slice for a man whose body is somewhat older than his spirit. I am working under the pressure of time. It takes six years before an orange tree gives fruit - can I afford to wait that long? So my head reels with schemes to produce more and more. On my farm you can see my turnips and carrots, my watermelons and batteries of chickens, my citrus grove and fruit orchard. No manager, no foreman, no labourers, none of the indispensable necessities of farming as I understood it in South Africa. All you see is this poor old simpleton who knows that without the labour of his back and the sweat of his brow his land will not give of its bounty. You can understand why I love it so much!

As I toil patiently and lovingly in my fields my mind surveys my almost three-score-and-ten years of life. Hard physical work under the open blue sky is conducive to reflective thought.

To what end was I created? Has it changed the world, that my parents knew not the modern techniques of birth control, so as to prevent a thirteenth entry into this world of sorrow and joy? What will remain soon of all the hopes and dreams, the trials and tribulations? Will I become as though I had never been, nothing surviving, nothing?

Should I turn religious again in my old age? In my childhood my belief in the faith of my father and his forefathers scored very high. In South Africa this belief degenerated into a vague token observance of tradition. This played a sentimental and possibly useful part in my life and that of my family, but it did not constitute religion. At times I suffer spasmodic revivals and relapses, and feel like a performing evangelist such as Billy Graham. Basically I am convinced that whatever happens to us is the result of our own actions, a natural consequence of apparent causes, in no way whatsoever connected with God. I cannot believe that God has the time or the means to watch over every living creature on Earth. Nor can I accept the resurrection of the soul after death, despite the great number of thinkers like Christ and Maimonides who have accepted this very comforting creed. I consider that many rabbinical ideas and customs are irreligious and alien to the law of Moses.

Nevertheless, I accept the Bible as the embodiment of profound truth and ultimate wisdom. In fact, in the evenings, after I have finished my banking business and the vast amount of clerical work involved in modern agriculture, I busy myself with writing my own commentaries on the Bible. These may explain such portions of the Bible as appear to be out of tune with modern concepts of morality and virtue. I think that the Bible should be modernised, trimmed and polished so that schools and universities can use it for the study of social sciences, medicine, agriculture, philosophy and literature, as well as divinity. It contains "vitamins" essential for our problem-wracked world. No other book or pill could serve more effectively as a tranquiliser, if only it were stripped of its mystery.

But this affection in which I hold the Bible is not the same as my former faith in it. In Israel I float about somewhat arbitrarily between the fanatical believers and the equally radical freethinkers. I quarrel constantly and unanswerably with both wings of the national life, much to the dissatisfaction of my beloved wife.

Actually that is somewhat overstated. There are four types of Jew in Israel: the ultra-religious, the orthodox, the atheist and the nationalist although of course all the others may also be nationalists.

The ultra-religious are so determined to keep the Sabbath peace that they go out regularly to battle with the rest of the country by throwing stones at cars. They deny the existence of the State of Israel in case it delays the coming of the Messiah. They refuse to use Hebrew in everyday conversation, even though it is the national language.

One such Rabbi of my acquaintance once warned me that Israel would be destroyed with fire and brimstone because of the way in which the Israelis broke the holy laws. "My friend," I answered him, "God was prepared to spare Sodom if he could find ten virtuous men surely you and your friends can muster a minyan to save Tel Aviv from being overthrown like the cities of the plain!"

When he urges me to believe in resurrection after death, I ask him to show me in the Bible the promise of Paradise. "The dead will live again," he quotes.

"That is not resurrection," I maintain, "certainly not in a sense of re-living. It only means that their memory, deeds and example survive the end of their flesh." We have some capital arguments, notwithstanding my wife's disapproval of my impertinence in out-talking a Rabbi.

Remembering this discussion reminds me that I was setting out the reflections of my old age or, rather, my advanced middle age. I have worked hard, earned a living and raised my family - could a king or general claim more at the end of his days? I await old age and even death without fear. Many people in their late sixties are obsessed by terror of the imminent darkness - I say, let it come when and how it may. In fact I feel that this last stage of my pilgrimage is in many ways the best. Passions, desires and ambitions have cooled into the maturity of comprehension. Religious people fear damnation: I have no such worries. A Rabbi once admonished: "Against thy will thou art born against thy will thou hast to live against thy will thou must die." I do not recall how I felt about being born, but about living and dying I prefer Stevenson's "...glad have I lived and gladly die..."

There is one thing about death for the common man - it gives us overwhelming revenge against the tyrants and the mighty. They all come down to six feet of earth, a comforting reflection for ordinary men like myself, who travel cautiously through life. When I attend a funeral and observe the elaborate tombstones around me, I remember that all things are vanity, and that the paths of glory lead but to the grave.

It is curious how many great and good men have died in grief, sorrow and disappointment. I think of Christ, Herzl, Gandhi. While I do not believe in Christ's divinity, he was certainly one of the noblest of men, if not the noblest of all. The purity of his soul is self-evident. His virtues made him dangerous to the rulers of society. On a careful reading of the Gospels, it is clear that he himself never claimed divinity. He does talk of his father in heaven, but that was an everyday phrase in the prayers of devout Jews, still used even today without any implication of superhuman pretensions. I believe that the Pharisees, determined to destroy him, invented the

heresy that they ascribed to him, just as the opponents of Joan of Arc did hundreds of years later or as men are destroyed today by false labels that they are Communists.

So I do not envy the great and the mighty: I have done my duty and that is enough to give me satisfaction. I have had my ups as well as my downs. My one regret has been my discovery that it is impossible to shield my children from my own mistakes and miseries. Every generation must make its own errors. I made up my mind when I was a boy that all that mattered was education, and so have given all my children opportunities that were denied to me. That they are happier or more grateful than we were, I cannot say. Still it is good to feel that I have achieved something, even if it was not perfection. I do not believe in mourning over disappointments and misfortunes, but prefer to find out what fault or miscalculation led to the loss. At least I have profited, if only in self-knowledge. The great secret is not to expect 100 percent out of life - fifty percent is a good enough settlement.

So, even though I may go any day to join the great majority in the underground movement, I do not allow thoughts of death to affect me in any way. I work harder than many men half my age. Curiously enough, age and worries have not deprived me of my hair, although it has turned a distinguished shade of grey; the unkind and ribald young might call it white.

I have been trying to pin down the mystery that is myself. These reflections, while working in the fields, revived my old dream of passing on my message to the world an acute attack of the illness which led to "Peace, Perfect Peace". In these memoirs I have told the story of a simple man trying desperately to keep his nose ahead of the game and to feed and educate his family. Have I been a success?

What is success? My real assets are not shown in my balance sheet although by this I do not mean that I cheat the Commissioner of Taxes, Heaven forbid! My undisclosed assets are a wonderful and devoted wife, decent and loyal children, delightful grandchildren, a tranquil soul, peace of mind and above all good health. Without health nothing can be enjoyed. I suppose one of these days even these precious assets will also be taxed!

The secret of success is the principle of a motor car. Health is the engine, capital the fuel, keeping cool and calm the radiator. If something goes wrong, then doctors, lawyers and psychiatrists serve as mechanics. Above all you need system in everything – even the hangman needs it.

Of course, I have had some very bad moments. In my youth, science was the springboard to universal human happiness, with H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw and all that super-optimism. The hydrogen bomb age is bewildering and terrifying. After the Flood, the Lord promised that he would never again smite every living thing, however badly men might behave. I hope that man will emulate his example. I think with dread of the words in Genesis: "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

On the other hand, when I think of the pace of modern life, with radios, television, cars, aeroplanes, rockets, I do not know what I believe any more. I am astounded by

such a multiplicity of miracles within the lifetime of one man. If the weather were to change as rapidly as our way of living, all the meteorologists would go out on strike.

So the end of the story of this simple man is, I'm afraid, that I have not yet grasped the point of it all. Perhaps somebody, much cleverer than I, will understand why I was born, why I fought so hard. I am passionately convinced that some testament of a common man like myself should remain.

Naturally, every member of my family is convinced that I am not worthy of being recorded. Who am I?, they ask. One close relative wrote to me in most arrogant terms, to stop my nonsense at once. advised me that if I am bored I should play cards!

Sometimes I worry about my being too respectable to be interesting to anybody. But there are so many millions like me, so few truly great and memorable men and women. Surely the record of the faceless, nameless man battling for his daily bread, is also worthy of preservation? But I am convinced that, in a way, I am interesting. Some even consider me to be an original and peculiar character, but that is nonsense. The whole point is this I am commonplace! As I work in my fields, run my Cape Town business by correspondence at night, handle my banking transactions, and dabble with my Biblical commentaries, I dream of my story (original title: Simple Simon) appearing in print. Some people might be furious, particularly my relations, unless the manuscript is edited - we do not want libel cases. Mind you, it might have been much more interesting if I had been a ne'er-do-well, and I admit that my life story may have had insufficient spice for modern taste. I said that in the beginning!

What I have been and done and thought must stand as my vindication. My last comfort is that I consider a man fortunate who remembers the date of his birth but is not obliged to know that of his death.

## OBITUARY RADIO

The following obituary was broadcast over Kol Zion Lagolah on the evening of January 17th, 1964. The author and speaker was Larry Elyan, Leon's cousin,<sup>63</sup> who had made Aliyah from Ireland and who was at that time a regular broadcaster for Israel Radio, with his voice easily recognisable for its mellifluous Irish brogue.

"My talk tonight has a note of sadness in it, but it is by no means a sad story. It concerns an uncle of mine, who died here just over a month ago. Leon Hodes was his name. He was born just seventy years ago, in a small town in Latvia, one of the Baltic provinces of Tzarist Russia. He was one of thirteen children. When he was only a lad of fifteen, he came to South Africa. But he was a tough youngster, with plenty of grit and determination, and South Africa offered him opportunities never before available to him.

"By dint of hard work, and by living on what in Ireland would be called the "smell of an oil rag", he managed to accumulate a little money. His first thought was to help his less fortunate brothers and sisters, still living in severe hardship. He was particularly concerned with some of his eight sisters, and all his efforts were concentrated on bringing them out to South Africa, where there were hopeful marriage prospects for them. Years later he used to recall, with a sly chuckle, that he brought them out, not in order of seniority, but according to their "market value"!

"Be that as it may, as the years went by Leon Hodes did well for himself. He became a successful businessman. He married, had a family, and his children in turn married. He made quite a lot of money. He owned considerable property, and materially was well provided for. But all the time he was consumed by one burning desire: to go back to the land of his forefathers, to live there. He had always been a keen Bible student and a devoted Zionist. Not just only a generous contributor to Zionist funds oh no! His overall ambition was to come here to work in the land, in the land he loved, and to till its soil. "And so, in 1950, thirteen years ago, this hardheaded successful city businessman wound up his affairs in South Africa and came to live here in a moshav. Let me explain here what a moshav is. Briefly, it is a European type of farming village, under private ownership, but worked cooperatively by its inhabitants. It differs from a kibbutz, where everything is owned collectively by its members. Anyway, the moshav in which Leon Hodes settled was at Rishpon, somewhere between the cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa.

"It was certainly no easy job for a man born and bred in a city, who had worked all his life at trade and commerce, to transform himself into a working farmer. But Leon Hodes, at almost sixty years of age, did it! With the aid of his wife, his daughter and son-in-law, he reared poultry, he grew tropical fruits and vegetables, and he planted a pardes, an orchard producing luscious oranges, grapefruit and tangerines. He worked from dawn to dusk, but he was immensely happy at his work. His greatest joy was the knowledge that he was fulfilling the Biblical prophecy of turning the desert into a garden.

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<sup>63</sup> Larry Elyan (1902 – 1992) was the eldest son of David Elyan (1876 – 1928) and Sarah Elyan (Nee Hodes) (1877 – 1956). Sarah was Leon's eldest sister

"Back home from the fields, he would closet himself in his farm house, and there he studied and wrote. He wrote feverishly, about his own life and work, and about his dreams and ideas on Israel's future. He burned the midnight oil studying the Bible always his guiding light and source of inspiration. He actually wrote a new commentary on it. He hoped one day to see some of his writings published. But alas! his death came very suddenly, the result of an unfortunate accident, and he was laid to rest, just over a month ago.

"Over the years he underwent a complete change of personality. From being a typically alert, urbanised businessman, he became a son of the soil, of hardy physique, with a profound sense of values and a tangy sense of humour.

"The interment took place in the village cemetery, set in idyllic rural surroundings, and a simple, dignified ceremony was carried out by his fellow farmers.

"As I looked round at the friends and relatives at the graveside, I saw among them a group of rugged-faced, horny-handed men, indistinguishable from the types of peasant farmers I had known in Ireland. I knew then that although I was witnessing the passing of a man who had toiled to build the new Israel, there was no reason to despair his work would be carried on.

"Shalom!"

## MOSHAV TRIBUTE (original in Hebrew on the following page)

The following tribute to Leon Hodes was written by a fellow-moshavnik, A. Lisod, for a local newsletter. It has been translated from the Hebrew.

Leon Hodes arrived at the moshav at a mature age,<sup>64</sup> and from a strange world from South Africa. He was filled with vitality and youthful enthusiasm, and at the age of 57 he began agricultural work. With sacred fervour, almost as a worshipper before his Maker, he worked his field, whether it was in his vegetable garden, with fruit trees, or in the orchard. He had a special feeling for farm labour. As he used to emphasize to me, the work relaxed him and restored him to spiritual equilibrium.

I met him often and enjoyed talking with him. Leon was brimming with youthful energy and good will. He was a man of culture and thought who never ceased, even after a day's work on his farm, from peering into books of philosophy, and he wrote down his impressions with a view to publication. He revealed to me that some time ago he had completed a book, in the English language, of research into the Bible. Comrade Hodes did his work and led his life without seeking prominence or pursuing honour. He was modest and pleasant to everyone with whom he came in contact. He was a father who gave his heart and soul to his family and was deeply involved with the Jewish people and the young State of Israel.

The members of Moshav Rishpon find it hard to accept the fact that he was run over not far from the village and that we shall no longer be able to meet this noble and dear figure, who encouraged faith in simplicity and humility, in justice and self-sacrifice. It is painful that he was snatched from us while so active and energetic. The cord of life has been snapped from the dynamic and enthusiastic Leon, the eternal youth, who was in his 71st year.

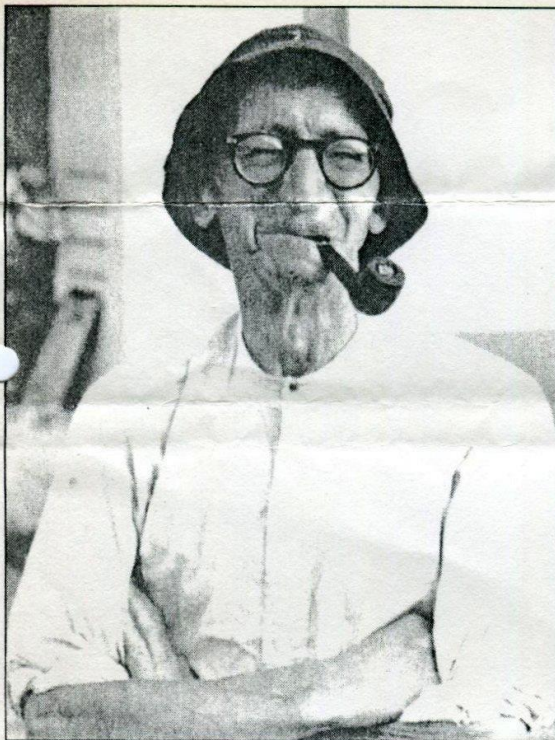
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<sup>64</sup> 1951



## הודס רחל וליאון

נולד ב-1897 בליטא  
נפטר ב-1963



בגיל מבוגר הגיע לכפר ומעולם זר - מדרום אפריקה, אך תוסס ומלא מרץ נעורים. בן 57 התחיל בעבודה חקלאית. בחרדת קודש, כמעט כמתפלל לפני קונו, עבד בשדהו, אם זה היה גן הירקות שלו, עצי הפרי או חלקת הפרדס. הרגיש טעם מיוחד בעצם העבודה בחקלאות, וכפי שהיה מדגיש לפני, היתה העבודה מרגיעתו ומחזירתו לשיווי משקל נפשי. לעתים קרובות פגשתיו ונמשכתי לחטוף שיחה קלה עם ליאון, שהיה שופע ומשפיע עליך שפע מרץ נעורים ורצון טוב. איש תרבות והגות שלא חדל גם לאחר יום העבודה במשקו לעיין בספרי הגות ומחשבה, והיה רושם את רשימותיו הרבות למען הביאם בדפוס לפני הציבור. גילה לי שלפני זמן סיים את כתיבת ספרו בשפה האנגלית - חקירותיו והגיגיו בתנ"ך. הח' הודס עשה את עבודתו וחי את חייו מבלי לחפש אחרי התבלטות, ומבלי לרדוף אחרי כבוד. אדם צנוע ונוח לחברה ולבריות. אב מסור בלב ונפש למשפחתו ודואג נאמן לעמו.

הלב לא רצה להאמין שנדרס לא הרחק מהכפר ולא נוסף להפגש עוד עם דמות אצילה ויקרה זו המעודדת לאמונה בפשטות ובענוה, ביושר ובמסירות נפש וצר ללב על שנלקח מאתנו בחטף וכי בעצם תכניותיו הרבות והמבורכות נפסק פתיל חייו, של ליאון התוסס ומלא המרץ, הצעיר הנצחי, והוא בן 71.

א. ליסוד



נולדה ב-1895 בליטא  
נפטרה ב-1975

רחל נולדה בליטא ב-1895. ב-1950 עלתה ארצה עם בעלה ובתה מדרום אפריקה. טיפלה יפה בבני המשפחה ובמשק ונפטרה ב-1975. יהיה זכרה ברוך!

יצחק



**Friedlander v Hodes Bros.  
1944 CPD 169**

Cape of Good Hope Provincial Division  
1943. November 25, 26, 30; December 10.  
DAVIS, J.

**Flynote**

*Master and servant. --- Dismissal on grounds of negligence and/or incompetence. --- Onus. --- Whether dismissal justified.*

**Headnote**

When a defendant discharges the *onus* of proving that a plaintiff who had been appointed a farm manager has been negligent and/or incompetent, the plaintiff in order to succeed must prove facts which are sufficiently strong to disturb the balance of probabilities.

In an action by plaintiff for damages for wrongful dismissal, the Court found that the contract of employment of plaintiff as a farm manager had been established, but that as the evidence by the defendant disclosed that the plaintiff was not competent for the job he had undertaken, and the plaintiff who sought to meet the *prima facie* case against him (1) by tendering positive proof that he had displayed all due care and competence, and (2) by endeavouring to prove other facts which showed that the *prima facie* inference of negligence and/or incompetence was not one which could fairly be drawn, had failed to do so,

Held, that the defendant was justified in summarily dismissing him.

*Flemmer v Ainsworth* [1910 TS 81](#), considered and applied.

**Case Information**

Action for damages.

The relevant facts appear from the reasons for judgment.

*H. Snitcher*, for the plaintiff: The contract has been established and the defendants have failed to prove such negligence on the plaintiff's part to justify a summary dismissal.

*P. Schock*, for the defendants: There is implied in every contract

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of service the condition that the servant is competent to perform the work he is engaged to do. Hence, if he performs his work in an incompetent manner, he can be justifiably dismissed. *Pindar v Malcomess & Co. Ltd.* 1905 EDC 266, at p. 272). The evidence shows that the plaintiff was either incompetent to perform the work he had undertaken, or that he performed it in a grossly negligent manner, or both. What degree of negligence justifies a servant being dismissed summarily is a question of fact to be determined from all the circumstances. See *Wallace v Rand Daily Mails Ltd.* [1917 AD 479](#).

Defendants have shown an abnormally low return of profits of the vegetable crops, in which plaintiff had sole control. According to *Flemmer v Ainsworth* [1910 TS 81](#) this had the effect of transferring the *onus* on to the plaintiff; or, at any rate, it created a *prima facie* case against the plaintiff calling for an answer. If then no satisfactory explanation is given by the plaintiff, the defendants have discharged the *onus* of showing that the loss was due to the plaintiff's negligence, and therefore his dismissal was justified. See also *Jupiter General Insurance Co. Ltd. v Shroff* ([1937, 3 AER 67](#)).

*Snitcher*, in reply.

*Cur. adv. vult.*

*Postea* (December 10th).

**Judgment**

DAVIS, J.: Plaintiff sues defendants for £700 (or alternatively £80) damages for wrongful dismissal. In his amended declaration he sets out that, from 1st April, 1943, he entered into a verbal agreement with defendants, whereunder he was admitted as a working partner in defendants' farm at Simondium, subject to three months' notice, on the basis of an equal share of profits, he to be allowed to draw not less than £40 a month, even if the profits were less than that amount. The remaining terms are, for the moment, immaterial, save that he was impliedly to live in the house on the farm. He goes on to say that he worked under this agreement until 26th July, 1943, when he was summarily and unlawfully dismissed, and he claims £700 damages. Alternatively, he says that on 11th January he was engaged as farm manager at £40 a month, together with free board and lodging, that he was summarily and unlawfully dismissed on 26th July; he claims

A

Figure 3 Supreme Court Case



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£80 damages. Defendants in their plea admit the alternative contract, and say that it continued throughout up to 26th July, when, as they admit, they summarily dismissed plaintiff. They say that they were justified in doing so, in that "plaintiff was at all material times wholly incompetent in carrying out his duties as farm manager and/or was grossly negligent and careless in the performance of his said duties, more particularly in that: (a) he failed to ensure that the soil on which the vegetables were grown was adequately and properly supplied with manure; (b) he failed to ensure that the said soil was provided with correct and sufficient fertilizer; (c) he failed to sow the vegetables in a proper manner; (d) he allowed the vegetables, more particularly the carrots and turnips, to grow too thickly and failed to ensure that they were thinned out; (e) he planted the cauliflowers and cabbages too late in the season and the wrong variety was used; (f) he permitted weeds to grow among the vegetables and failed to have these removed." As to the agreement alleged by plaintiff in his main claim, they say that there were negotiations between the parties in regard to fixing a permanent basis of employment, but say that in fact no contract was ever concluded between them.

The facts, as I find them, are shortly as follows. On 11th January, 1943, defendants advertised for a farm manager. Plaintiff immediately went down to defendants' farms, Langerust and Nieuwehoop, at Simondium, and was engaged on a monthly basis on the admitted terms by Leon Hodes, one of the defendants, who lived on one of the farms, and whom I shall hereafter call the defendant. Plaintiff at once saw that the farms were in a very bad condition, and advised defendant, who had bought them at the high figure of upwards of £23,000 and had been losing money, and who was being much worried by his family on the subject, to sell them. Defendant attempted to do so, but failed to get an adequate offer. Plaintiff, realising that vegetables were at a high price, then started into attempt to grow vegetables on an extensive scale. Defendant, at about this time, had a number of discussions with plaintiff on the subject of his permanent employment, and by about 23rd March they had agreed on all the terms; eventually, about the end of March, defendant put before plaintiff a typewritten document (R.S.C. 5). This contains all the terms on which plaintiff relies for the contract which forms the basis of his main claim. He says that he agreed with all the terms as representing what had already been arrived at, save one as to arbitration, which

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was new. After discussing this term with defendant, and being satisfied on the subject, he verbally accepted all the terms set out in the document, which he kept. Still later, defendant put before plaintiff, in rough outline, a number of alternative schemes, whereunder plaintiff was to put some money into the venture, or, at any rate, have some financial responsibility in regard thereto (R.S.C. 7). Defendant, who knew nothing of farming, became dissatisfied with the way things were going, and called in two experts from the Elsenburg Agricultural College. They came down on 22nd July, and expressed a poor opinion of what they saw: on the following Monday, 26th July, defendant summarily dismissed plaintiff, who then instituted the present action.

[His Lordship, having considered the evidence as to whether a contract of employment had been concluded between the parties, proceeded.]

For these reasons, I find that the contract between the parties was in terms of the agreement put forward by plaintiff.

I come now to the defence of incompetence and/or negligence. Great reliance was placed by Mr. Schock upon the judgment of INNES, C.J., in *Flemmer v Ainsworth* 1910 TS 81. That was also an action for damages by a farm manager for wrongful dismissal: his contract was in some respects not altogether dissimilar from the one I have found to be the contract in this case. The defendant was held entitled to dismiss him, *inter alia* on the ground of the death of certain 25 ostriches. The learned CHIEF JUSTICE said: "It is clear that it was not the ordinary 10 per cent. loss which was to be expected in stock generally; it is common cause that it was abnormal. . . . The defendant says that they died because the plaintiff neglected them. But it is common cause that they died from abnormal causes. I think that circumstances, coupled with the very large proportion of deaths, throws upon the plaintiff the *onus* of satisfying the Court that there was no negligence on his part. He is the person who knows; nobody else does. It is for him to satisfy us that the birds died from causes which could not be practically prevented, and not from his own negligence". It was contended that the same principles apply to the present case. Now in the first place, with the greatest respect, I am not sure that the learned CHIEF JUSTICE meant to go as far as his words would seem to indicate. I need not again go into the question of the shifting of *onus*: that has been both ably and exhaustively dealt with by SCHREINER, J., in *Klaassen v Benjamin*

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1941 TPD 80 and in the well-known anonymous article in 1941 SALJ 1. It may well be that the learned CHIEF JUSTICE meant no more than that, in the circumstances, the plaintiff had made out a *prima facie* case, and that it was for the defendant by his evidence to disturb the balance of probabilities created in his (plaintiff's) favour by those circumstances. The only ground upon which the reference to *onus* can be justified is, in my opinion, if the matter be regarded from the point of view of chattels having been entrusted to the care of a person: the *onus* is then on that person either to return them or to account for his not doing so. If he does not, the creditor need not allege negligence --- see *Frenkel v Ohlsson's Cape Breweries* 1909 TS 957 at pp. 963-965, and authorities there cited. But the learned CHIEF JUSTICE does not seem to base his judgment upon that ground. However, that may be, I wish in any case to add this remark. [The balance of probabilities must initially not be a slight one: it must be one which is sufficiently strong to justify the Court in acting upon it --- see *Cape Coast Exploration Ltd. v Scholtz & Another* 1933 AD 56 at p. 75; *West Rand Estates Ltd. v New Zealand Insurance Co. Ltd.* 1925 AD 245 at p. 263]. (The same remarks which I have just made in regard to the use of the word "*onus*" in *Flemmer v Ainsworth* apply, in spite of the authorities which the learned Judge cited and followed, also to the remarks of KOTZE, J.A., in the latter of the



two Appellate Division cases.) Thus, notwithstanding the *prima facie* case established by plaintiff, defendant can succeed not merely if he establishes upon the whole case that the balance of probabilities is in his favour, but if he so far disturbs the balance previously established by his opponent that there is no longer a balance either way, or even if he disturbs it only so far that the balance established by the plaintiff has now become too slight to justify the Court in acting upon it. I say this because no emphasis is laid upon this point in the article to which I have made reference, and some passages in it might actually lead to an opposite inference. (That is not the case in respect of the judgment, for SCHREINER, J., explicitly speaks of the balance being "substantially" in favour of the party upon whom the *onus* lies.) I have to consider, consequently, whether in the first place the defendant --- upon whom in the present case the *onus* of proving negligence and/or incompetence on the part of the plaintiff admittedly lies --- has made out a sufficient *prima facie* case, and secondly, if he has done so, whether the plaintiff has sufficiently disturbed any balance of probabilities thus

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created. In *Mans v Union Meat Co.* [1919 AD 268](#), at p. 271, DE VILLIERS, J.A., spoke as if it were sufficient for the party, who has to meet a *prima facie* case, to succeed in "raising a reasonable doubt in the mind of the Court". Those words would, I respectively suggest, be suitable rather to a criminal than a civil case the learned Judge meant, I think, to speak of a doubt which was sufficiently great to be capable of disturbing the balance of probabilities in the manner which I have indicated above. When, in the case of *Estate Grant-Dalton v Grant-Dalton* ([1942 CPD at p 278](#)), after quoting the passage in *Mans*' case in full, I used the phrase "raise a sufficiently strong doubt", I certainly meant "sufficiently strong to disturb the balance of probabilities"

Now I am aware, as I have said, that the case of *Flemmer v Ainsworth* dealt with movables in the possession of Flemmer, and that in that respect the case was a stronger one than the present. It is stronger in another important respect also, namely that, before the final results of plaintiff's operations were ascertained, the matter had passed out of his hands, owing to his summary dismissal on the 26th July. Nevertheless, I think that the defendant has here proved facts which constitute a *prima facie* case against plaintiff. The following are the facts established. They consist, as was also the case in *Flemmer v Ainsworth*, partly in facts which raise an inference against plaintiff, and partly in facts which go directly to prove incompetence and/or negligence against him.

Sixteen morgen --- a very large area --- were put by plaintiff under vegetables: cabbages and cauliflowers, beet, turnips, carrots and potatoes. (There were also some peas and onions, and another small area also under potatoes, but these seem to have been of little importance). Omitting the potatoes, the results as shown by defendant's books, which were not put in, but were available in Court and not challenged, were shown to be as follows:

| Name of Vegetable.         | Costs of seed or plants. | Yield.    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| Cabbages and cauliflowers. | £15 0 0                  | £20 17 1  |
| Beetroot                   | £17 5 0                  | £6 1 11   |
| Turnips                    | £5 10 0                  | £31 12 11 |
| Carrots                    | £27 4 0                  | £184 0 6  |

A further amount of some £80 to £90 may be expected from the carrots. These results, more particularly in respect of the first three items, are admitted to be extraordinary. The cabbages and

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cauliflowers might normally, even on this farm, have been expected to bring in £230, beetroot about £187, turnips about £150. So it comes to this: on these three items, the actual yield was £58, whereas it might have been expected to have been £570. The result of the carrots, though not so bad, might fairly have been expected to have been considerably better than it was. The potatoes I have omitted from these calculations. The seed cost just upon £130, and a yield of £800 might have been expected. Defendant says he only got 60 bags, valued at 10s. apiece. It is true that I have only his word, uncorroborated by his books, for it, and that, in any case, it has been suggested that these lands were flooded out. But no proof was led of this flooding, save that defendant admits that a third of the lands was flooded. After all, plaintiff knew perfectly well that this issue would be raised: he indeed founded his claims for damages on the hopes which he based on the potatoes. However, even ignoring the potatoes, as I do, these results seem to me to be ample to bring the case within the principle enunciated in *Flemmer v Ainsworth*, as explained by me above. But the evidence does not by any means rest there.

On 22nd July, the two experts from the Eisenburg Agricultural College, Dr. Vorster and Mr. van der Merwe, came over at defendant's invitation to inspect these lands, upon which they spent some three hours. I unhesitatingly accept their evidence in all respects: neither their competence nor their integrity was in any way assailed. They found that the turnips made a very poor impression on them and were not at all a healthy crop. They were short of "food"; and plaintiff admitted that they had had no stable manure. They were too close together, and should have been thinned out in time. They could still have been thinned out and have had some top dressing, but, while a crop might still have been obtained, it could not have been a good crop. This was ground on which vegetables could not possibly be successfully grown without plentiful manuring, but which, with good rains and good manuring, should have been productive. From what they saw, they expected nothing of this crop. The reason for the poor showing of the beet was also lack of manure --- that, and late planting. They were also too close together, and there was a good deal of weed. Something might have been saved by thinning out and the giving of Government guano, but not



much apparently. The cauliflowers and cabbages were also planted too close together the cauliflowers seemed to be grown from a poor type of seed: they

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should, in any case, have been particularly heavily manured. The carrots were also too thick, and there was some weed, but not very bad. The use of compost or stable manure is advised for all vegetables --- in poor soil, such as some of this was, it is said to be essential. The potatoes were, according to the experts, manured in a wrong manner, and had been dressed with lime, which appears to be entirely unnecessary and, in any case, was also done in a wrong manner.

In my opinion, these proved facts raised a *prima facie* case of negligence and/or incompetence on the part of plaintiff, notwithstanding that, as plaintiff puts it, farming is not an exact science nobody can guarantee success. And, if unanswered, "the degree of that negligence and/or incompetence was sufficient to warrant his dismissal (see *Harmer v Cornelius* (5 CBNS 236)). After all, defendant could not have been expected to wait for another year to see if perhaps plaintiff might not do better next time, more especially in a matter of such great importance to him. This is a question of fact and not of law (see *Wallace v Rand Daily Mails Ltd.* (1917 AD at p 491)); but it is a question of fact upon which I entertain no doubt.

Just as in a case of *res ipsa loquitur* (see the article to which I have referred above) the plaintiff here seeks to meet the *prima facie* case made against him in two ways, firstly by tendering positive proof that he has displayed all due care and competence, and secondly by endeavouring to prove other facts which show that the *prima facie* inference of negligence and/or incompetence is not one which can fairly be drawn. Success in either of these attempts must result in a judgment in his favour. But they are here so interwoven, that I shall not attempt to distinguish them. Before dealing with them together, however, I must make two prefatory observations.

Plaintiff holds a Diploma with honours, gained a considerable number of years ago after a two years' course at the Grootfontein School of Agriculture. After five years as an assistant at the Lynedoch Welmoed Estate, for six years he was the general manager of the estate, which was one of the biggest wine farms in the Western Province, growing, among other things, general crops (what these included the Court was not told). He left of his own accord. There is no evidence that, except perhaps in regard to potatoes, plaintiff has had any previous experience in the growing, of vegetables. I have already found a certain measure of

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casualness in regard to his own affairs in plaintiff's make-up. It does not of course follow that, because a man is casual in what concerns only himself, he is necessarily casual also in what concerns others. Some people may be casual as regards their own affairs, and yet scrupulously careful where others are concerned: indeed, the very reason why they are careless in relation to matters affecting themselves may be that they expend so much energy on the affairs of others that they have none over for themselves. But here, plaintiff's casualness as already found by me was not confined to matters in which he alone was concerned. His omission to have a value placed upon the loose assets was one which affected his employer as well as himself.

There are certain facts which go some distance to negative the inference which might otherwise have been drawn against plaintiff. He had come upon what to him were new farms in a new district. The farms were primarily fruit and wine, and not vegetable farms, though catch crops had been grown on them part, at least, of the soil was undoubtedly poor. The previous manager, one Valter, notwithstanding twenty years' experience of one of the farms, had, as defendant admits, not made a success of vegetables. Plaintiff indeed avers that the whole district is a bad one for them --- but Dr. Vorster does not agree with this, and I do not accept it. Plaintiff undoubtedly had other difficulties to contend with. The labour on the farm, though adequate in number, was bad and undisciplined, though plaintiff himself says that it was immensely improved under his supervision. In any case, defendant had made arrangements to obtain Italian prisoners of war, and plaintiff had stopped him from doing so. His intentions were no doubt excellent --- but after that he can hardly rely on the badness of his labour supply as a valid excuse. The war prevented him from purchasing much that he might have, e.g. seed and fertiliser. He encountered three months of very deficient rainfall: at the time when 8 to 10 inches might have been expected, he received only three, and he had to depend entirely on rainfall, for there was no means of irrigating the beds. (When, however, Dr. Vorster several times emphasised the necessity of good rains in his estimate of what the land might have been expected to produce, he seems to have been speaking of rains after his visit, not before. Of what had happened earlier in the season, he must have known: Eisenburg is only a comparatively short distance from Simondium.)

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The most important point is the question of manure. Plaintiff not only had some trouble in obtaining sufficient fertiliser, but enough stable manure appears to have been altogether unobtainable. He had insufficient to make an adequate amount of compost, which, as van der Merwe tells us, takes two to three months to make. (It is noticeable that plaintiff says six weeks, which would not seem to show great acquaintance with it.) As much manure as possible was obtained elsewhere, but it was cheap kraal manure, which is apparently always unsatisfactory and which plaintiff much dislikes. Anyway, he had too little to go round, it being remembered that much of it had to be saved for the vines. It is contended that what was done by the plaintiff was not done in the course of ordinary farming operations: it was done against plaintiff's better judgment, on the insistence of defendant, as an experiment, the success of which he expressly refused to warrant. That, I accept, but it is not, I fear, conclusive. For plaintiff seems never to have told defendant that he did not have enough manure, or to have told him that, even as an experiment, the planting of vegetables without manure or compost on this large scale, and in this soil, would certainly fail. Dr. Vorster was very clear on the point without the necessary manure available, plaintiff should have



cut his coat according to his cloth, and have confined his operations strictly to such ground as he could properly manure. Plaintiff's own evidence of what he told defendant is to be found at page 42: "My point is that we were experimenting on a commercial basis. Mr. Hodes could not afford to wait. I said to him 'can't you just play quiet for a year' and he said no, he must have the money in soon. I said 'If you have got a certain amount of fertiliser and a certain amount of plants let us try'. He said 'Can you guarantee me' and I said 'I can guarantee you nothing'." Unless by "I can guarantee you nothing", plaintiff meant that statement to be taken literally, that is to say that he could guarantee that defendant would get nothing, his advice was wrong: failure was certain. Only a small portion of the cauliflowers, and the potatoes, received any manure at all. Plaintiff seemed to have imagined that by giving fifty per cent. more fertiliser he could make up for the lack of manure. He says, at page 46, that "with the facilities at my disposal those (that is, the main body) cauliflowers were fully fertilised", and again "I did my best to put in fertiliser in sufficient quantity to grow a crop". And at page 47: "I tried to make up for the lack of manure by putting in an extra dose, 50

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per cent. of fertiliser." He was wholly mistaken in this idea fertiliser can apparently never, under conditions such as this, make up for lack of stable manure or compost. Nor am I satisfied that he could not have made compost earlier and in greater quantities than he did, remembering that he was on the farm altogether for over six months, that as early as 19th February he had already drawn up figures to show defendant that, without a very big return from vegetables, he could not hope to balance the farm's budget, that he must have known all along that the sale was very problematical in view of the high prices which had to be obtained, and that by 21st March he knew definitely that the farms were not being sold. He should have known that for vegetables, compost is essential. And again, it hardly lies in plaintiff's mouth to plead lack of stable manure and compost, for it was entirely on his own advice (given here again no doubt with the best of intentions) that a herd of cows, which were on the farm, but which plaintiff regarded as unsatisfactory, was sold by defendant and taken off the farm in April: no attempt was made by plaintiff to replace them.

The late planting, which is admitted by plaintiff, is only in part ascribable to the urgent desire of defendant to get something growing: plaintiff appears never to have warned him that it was too late for satisfactory results, or that he was "taking a chance" with the cauliflowers on that account. The fact that the vegetables were too close together is explained by plaintiff as being due to his wish to counteract the slow and uncertain germination of the seed in that farm. That may well be so; it does not account for their not having been timeously thinned out, as they should have been. It is no excuse to say that he intended, after July 22nd, to do this: by that time it would have been too late to obtain satisfactory crops. The weeds should also have been taken out timeously --- with plaintiff's excuse as to labour difficulties I have already dealt. These are serious derelictions of duty, because it should have been obvious to plaintiff that the thinning out, and the removal of weeds, were all the more essential in view of the poorness of the soil and the absence of manure. Lastly, plaintiff admits that the usual way of manuring potatoes "right throughout the world" is the manner advocated by the experts. He was at least taking a great risk in doing it in any other way; nor does he give any explanation for the curious use of the lime. However, here again I am prepared to ignore the potatoes, for too

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much depends on defendant's testimony in regard to them, and, in any case, they were given sufficient manure. I had indeed considered whether in some way the potatoes might not be taken in plaintiff's favour, inasmuch as, notwithstanding plentiful manuring, they also were a failure. But I am satisfied that I cannot do so, because that failure may have been due to flooding or to the fact that the manure was given in an unusual manner, or to both. It will consequently be safer to ignore the potatoes altogether. That, of course, reduces the area of plaintiff's vegetable-growing operations to about 10 morgen --- still a very large area.

The growing of vegetables, according to Dr. Vorster, is a very specialised job. Plaintiff was, however, now taking on this very specialised job on a strange farm, with poor soil and in what must undoubtedly have been difficult conditions. Expert assistance was repeatedly suggested by defendant: this he consistently refused, contenting himself with talks with some of his neighbours --- who, undoubtedly, emphasised the difficulties of what he was trying to do. To take one instance: any expert would have told him that it was useless to expect good results, more particularly in soil such as this, from giving the crops fifty per cent. more fertiliser, in place of the essential compost or stable manure.

I am not saying that all plaintiff's attempts to grow vegetables without manure were a complete failure --- or that, even with manure, at least some part of his attempts did not also fail. But it seems clear that the attempt to grow vegetables in this soil, and on this scale, with no manure or compost, displays a lack of competence, and so, in a lesser degree, does the late planting of some of the vegetables. The omission to make adequate attempts to provide a sufficiency of compost shows slackness, and so, too, does the failure to thin out the plants in time and to get rid of the weeds. I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that plaintiff was not competent for the job which he had undertaken, and that in carrying it out he unfortunately displayed some of that casualness which characterises his conduct of his own affairs.

It follows that plaintiff must fail. A great proportion of the time of this case was taken up by the proof of the contract, upon which plaintiff has succeeded, and nearly all the exhibits related to this issue; to divide up the costs between the issues seems to be impracticable. I have not lost sight of the fact that plaintiff's claim was exaggerated --- he could in no circumstances have received more than £150. On the one hand, bearing in mind this fact

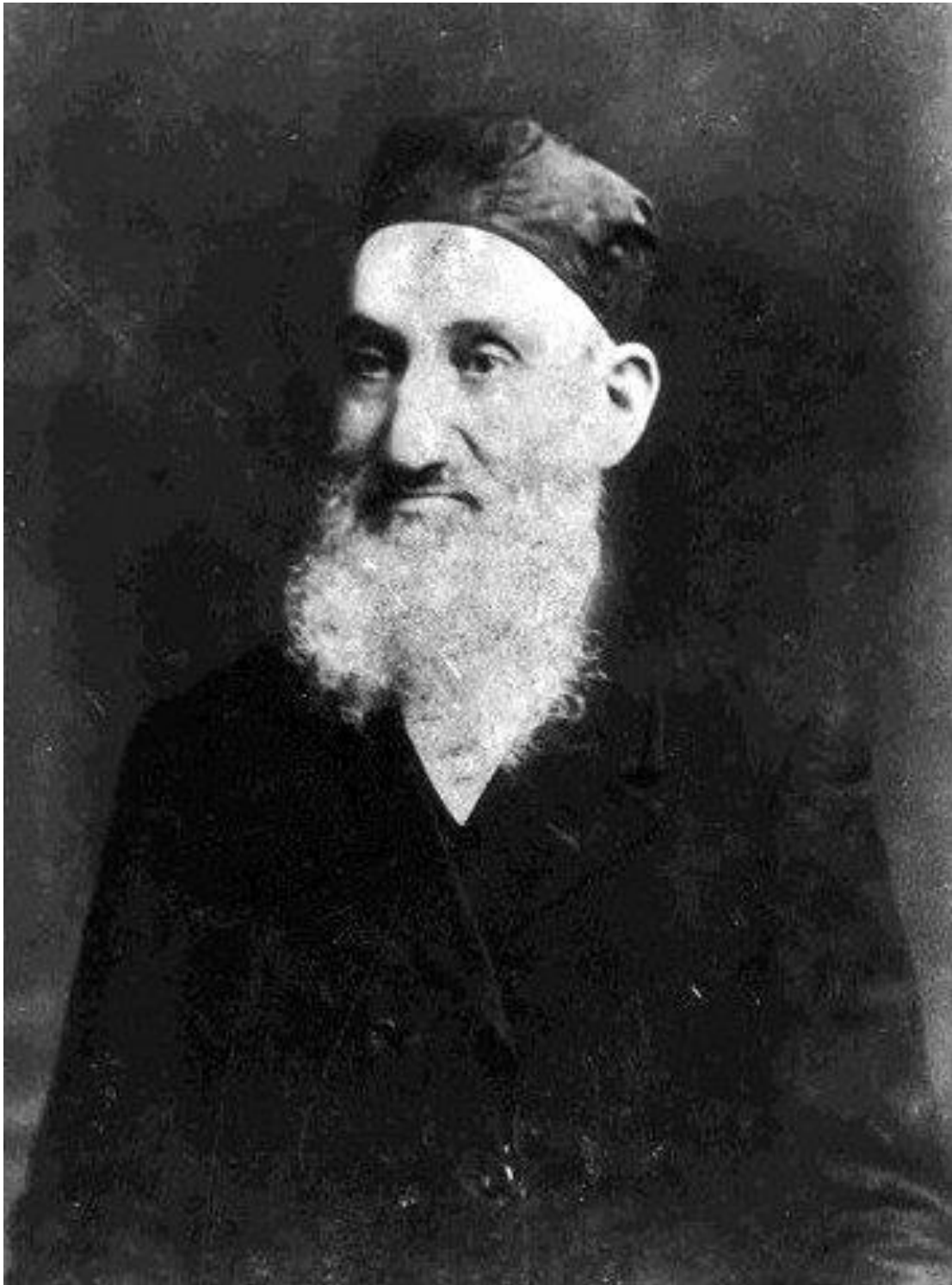
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and that defendant would be entitled to the general costs of the action, but on the other that the case might very possibly have finished in one day, if incompetence and/or negligence had been the sole issue, that Counsel's briefs would have been correspondingly smaller, and also that I have rejected most of defendant's evidence, the fairest order seems to me to be that there be no order as to costs. There will be judgment for defendant: no order as to costs, save such costs (of the amendments to the declaration) as plaintiff has already been ordered to pay.

Plaintiff's Attorneys: *R. Asherson & Asherson*; Defendants' Attorneys: *Joseph Levy & Berman*.

This judgement was kindly located by Gabrielle Hodes (Nee Lew)

## Photos



*Figure 4 Meyer Hodes, Leon's father*





Figure 5 The Hodes family: Meyer Hodes (1844 - 1928), his wife Deborah (Nee Luntz) (1856 - 1912) and some of their children. Girl at back left is Jaynie, the two girls next to her are Amelia and Rose (not sure of the order). The little boy on the bicycle is Benjamin. Boy at far left is either Leon or Louis and the boy at 2nd left is probably Willie

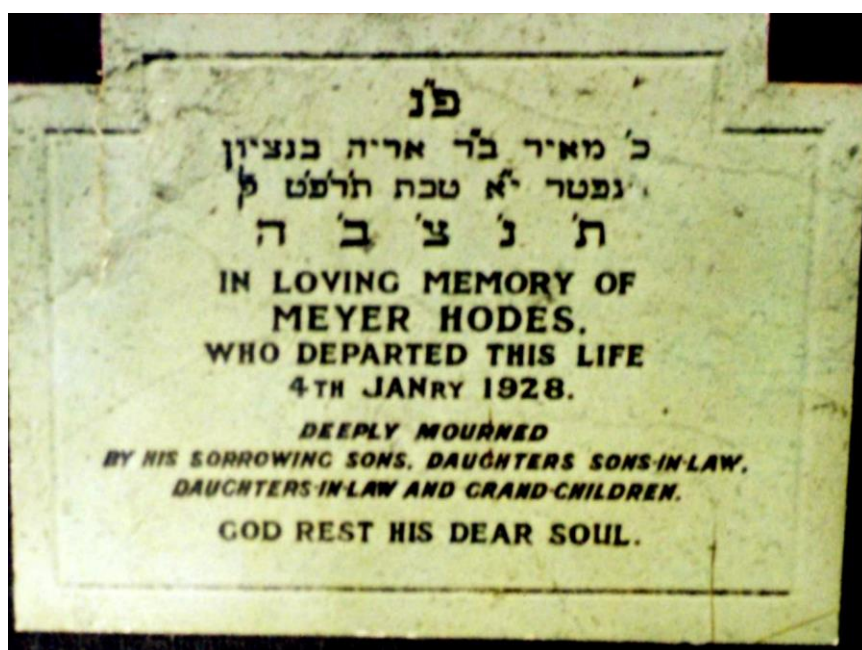


Figure 6 Tombstone for Meyer Hodes, who died in London in 1928 and is buried in the Edmonton cemetery buried there.





*Figure 5 Leon's first wife, Sarah Leah Hodes (Nee Glatt), who died in April 1924*



*Figure 7 The marriage of Leon Hodes to Sarah Leah Glatt on 21 March 1923 in Williston, Cape Province, South Africa. Leon is seated in the front row with Sarah next to him*



*Figure 8 Rachel Rabinowitz, Leon's 2nd wife*





*Figure 9 Rachel Rabinowitz, Leon's 2nd wife*



*Figure 10 Leon Hodes and Rachel Rabinowitz on their wedding day in Cape Town, South Africa on 20 June 1926*





Figure 11 Leon Hodes in East London, South Africa, 1924



*Figure 12 Leon and Rachel Hodes in South Africa with their son Aubrey circa 1930*





*Figure 13 Leon and Rachel Hodes at the beach in Cape Town, South Africa with their sons Aubrey and Lionel (at right) circa 1930*



*Figure 14 , Leon and Rachel Hodes with Rachel's mother, Esther Chana Rabinowitz (Nee Borodinsky) and Rachel's daughter Harriet, circa early 1930s*





*Figure 15 The Hodes children with their mother Rachel in Cape Town, South Africa in 1934. (Left to Right). Gillian, Aubrey, Rachel, Harriet, Meyer (in pram) and Lionel*



*Figure 16 The marriage of Rachel's daughter Harriet to Sam Levin in Cape Town, South Africa on 22 February 1942. The five Hodes siblings are present. L-R, Meyer, Gillian, Harriet, Aubrey and Lionel*



*Figure 17 Leon's brother Louis Hodes (1886-1950) taken at Sir Lowrys Pass, Cape province, South Africa in December 1946*





*Figure 18 Barmitzvah of Leon and Rachel's youngest son, Meyer Hodes on 25 January 1947. (Back, Left to Right), Aubrey, Harriet and her husband Sam Levin, Gillian and Lionel. (Front, Left to Right), Leon, Esther Rabinowitz (Nee Borodinsky), Rachel and Meyer*



*Figure 19 Rachel with her sons in Cape Town in 1947; Aubrey on his graduation day at the University of Cape Town and Meyer*



*Figure 20 Leon's wife Rachel in Cape Town, South Africa*





*Figure 21 Rachel Hodes*

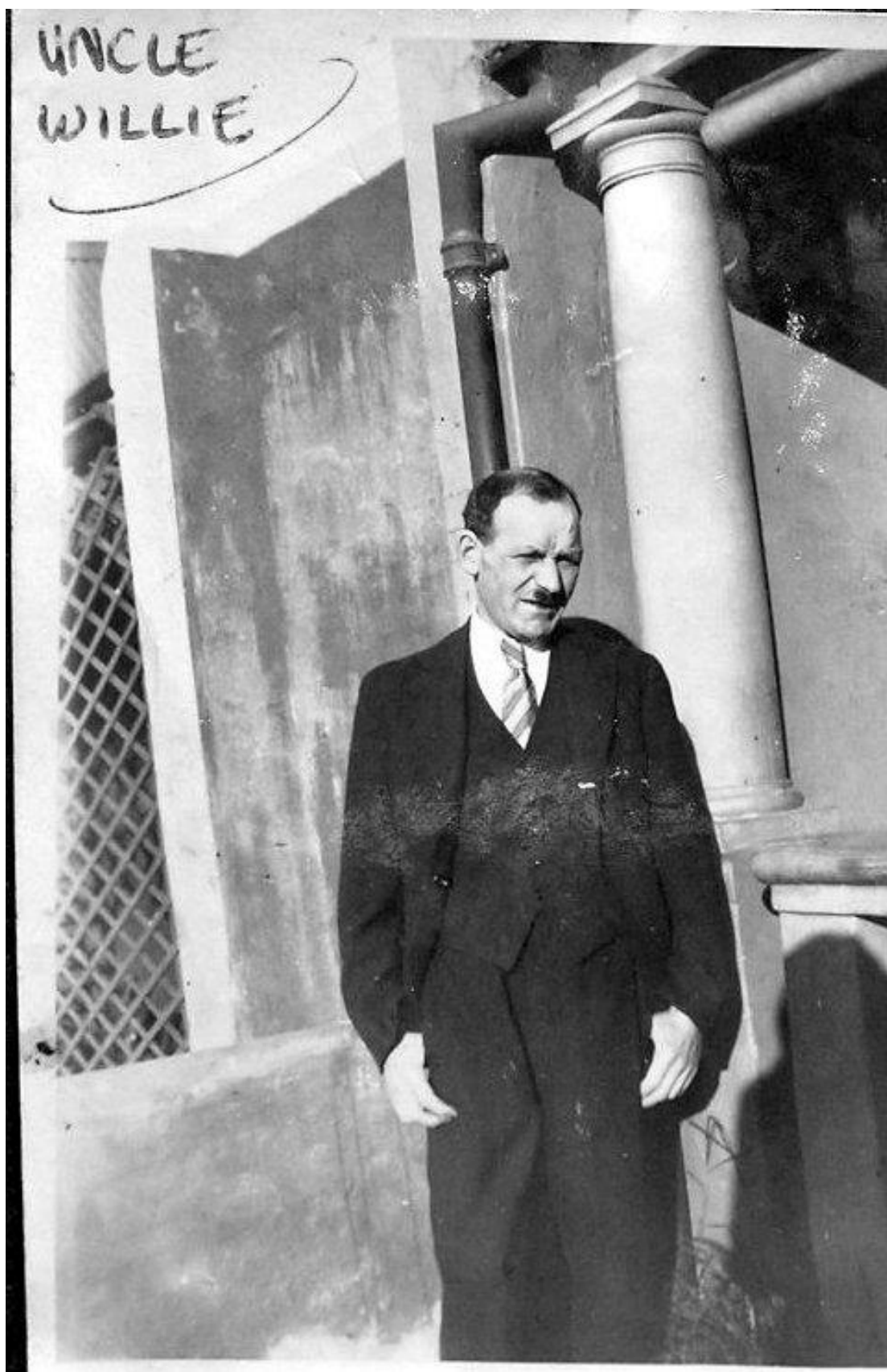


Figure 22 Leon's brother Willie (1888 – 1959)





*Figure 23 The Hodes house, "Hargil" in Mowbray, Cape Town, South Africa, January 1949. Back, Leon, Rachel, Aubrey and Meyer. Front, Harriet, her daughter Miriam (baby) and husband Sam Levin, Gillian.*



*Figure 24 The Hodes and Rabinowitz families at "Hargil", Cape Town, South Africa, May 1950, when Rachel's daughter Harriet, her husband Sam and daughter Miriam Levin visited from Israel*



*Figure 25 Leon Hodes (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) at the wedding of his son Lionel in Liverpool, England in April 1956*





*Figure 26 Rishpon, Israel early 1960s. Back is Leon Hodes. Front, (Left to Right), his daughter Gillian with her husband Yitzhak and their daughter Aviva*



*Figure 27 Leon Hodes (at left) and a neighbour in Rishpon, Israel in about 1960*



*Figure 28 Leon Hodes with his chickens in Rishpon, Israel*