

# Bubba Meise – my Jewish Johannesburg

By David Nathanson MD, Detroit 2023

*Tales of my Jewish youth, growing up in Johannesburg.*

I dug deeply into my memory, recognizing that memory blurs reality. I admit to glossing over unforgiving details that hide in the depths in order to make my stories more gratifying, and appealing.

I was born in 1943 at the old Florence Nightingale nursing home in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, forty-one years after my grandparents landed at different times at the docks in Cape Town following harrowing journeys in steerage on Union Castle Line boats from Southampton, England. (Right, me at 6 months)



I grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa, with *bubba meise* 'granny' stories, fables sprinkled with dramatic interjections common to Yiddish speakers from Eastern Europe, and family legends set against the backdrop of white privilege, and an environment of predominantly British, but also Afrikaans, African, and Asian-Indian traditions.



**Eastern European Jews arriving at Cape Town at the turn of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> centuries**

Like most South African Jews my ancestors had come from Lithuania and Poland. The Jewish community had lived there relatively peacefully for almost five hundred years when the political climate changed in Russia and with it the status of the Jews. The Czarist Russian government had created the Pale of Jewish Settlement.



The economic and social inequity resulting from new Russian laws in the 1880's, and the increasing levels of violence aimed at Jews, caused many to flee their homes. They emigrated to a number of countries including some 40,000 who came to South Africa. While most chose to settle in North and South America, my family was attracted by the discovery of gold in the mid 1880's adjacent to what was to become known as Johannesburg. The desire to leave Russia was thus matched by the promise of economic opportunities associated with gold mining. The new country offered relative safety and freedom from religious persecution. They chose to live close to people of similar background and culture. A small Jewish community already lived in the mining camps and shanties of Johannesburg when they arrived.

In Eastern Europe my family had constantly been reminded of their Judaism, first in small villages, or shtetls, and then in ghettos. Certain laws pertained to Jews only, and those living conditions separated Jews and non-Jews which created an insular highly developed Eastern European Jewish way of life, living according to the laws and traditions of Judaism.

Upon arrival in South Africa my grandparents experienced a variety of changes and freedoms. Jewish leaders, and not external forces, initiated processes and mechanisms of maintaining Jewish identity aimed at fighting the threat of assimilation. A complete range of Jewish schools, synagogues, social organizations, religious, and cultural institutions were built within small fairly well-defined areas. In this way Jews did not need to go outside of the spaces in which they lived to satisfy their social, religious, and cultural needs. These actions constantly reinforced certain ways of thinking, believing, and behaving, thus maintaining, and reproducing the values of a specific kind of Judaism practiced by our ancestors for generations. My family could live almost like they had lived in their original small towns and villages. The developing enclaves of Johannesburg Jewry functioned time and again as a way of ensuring that the Jewish community of Johannesburg would continue to exist and flourish. It was a way of guaranteeing its continuation and survival.

## My Maternal Grandparents

**Taube, nee Cohen**, my maternal grandmother, came from Zagare, a northeast Lithuanian town of about ten thousand people, half of whom were Jewish. She married Chaim Weinberg in a double wedding in 1905 with her cousin – it was cheaper this way. (see right). She had at least fifteen pregnancies. Six resulted in living births, but, at least nine, as she confided to me when I was in medical school, she deliberately lost with the help of a 'woman next door.'



**My maternal Grandpa Chaim (Hyman Harry) Weinberg**, from Memel, a west Lithuanian town bordering Germany, was a relatively astute man with an agonizingly pessimistic personality, initially had a concession store in George Gogh, selling goods to native Africans working on the goldmines. As new goldmines sprang up, Chaim moved the family to Brakpan, where he opened a hardware store selling building materials. This was a lucrative business that soon projected him to leadership positions in the growing town. He helped build the Brakpan synagogue and became a leader of the developing Jewish population of the town. He also sent money to remaining family in Lithuania, enough for them to afford the migration to South Africa, first living with my grandparents, and eventually moving out when they were a little more established.

## **My paternal grandparents**

My paternal grandfather, **Saul David Nathanson**, (right) born in 1885 in Svencionys, Lithuania initially sold fruit and vegetables in Cape Town to survive. His wife, Mary, nee Friedman, my paternal grandmother, was born in Suwalki, Poland.

My paternal grandparents married in Cape Town in December 1906 and moved to Johannesburg the next year. Unlike many immigrant Jews of the time, he was literate. He must have been quite entrepreneurial because he became a butcher in Johannesburg, one of the more lucrative professions for Jews in Lithuania. He taught my father an important concept – that we need to own property. Grandpa Nathanson bought a house in Braamfontein and acquired three more properties as the years passed. I remember sitting on the veranda of his house watching the funeral procession of the former prime Minister of South Africa, Jan Smuts, in 1950. Years later, I started my medical school education at the University of the Witwatersrand just a few blocks north of that house.



Grandpa David, for whom I'm named, died of a sigmoid volvulus ten years before I was born and, although I never met him, my father told me many stories about his beloved dad. He later gave me the mezuzah that grandpa had nailed to the Braamfontein synagogue entrance



David was the oldest of 14 siblings, all of whom emigrated to New York. He left Lithuania via the Latvian port city of Libau and sailed to London. He stayed for a few nights at the Poor Jews Temporary Shelter in Aldgate before embarking at Southampton and arriving in Cape Town on a contract ticket with the Union Castle Line. The ticket cost thirty-three English pounds in October 1902.

He had an English Queen Victoria 1887 half-crown in his pocket which he kept 'for luck.' He later gave it to his oldest son, my father, who gave it to me when I left



Johannesburg permanently in 1975. I still have it.

## My Parents

Both of my parents were born in South Africa, my father **Hyman Barnett Nathanson** in Johannesburg in 1907 and my mother, **Freda Charlotte Weinberg**, in Germiston in 1919. Their arranged marriage was in the Brakpan synagogue in 1941.

The practice of Judaism was a particularly important part of Eastern European Jewish life in Johannesburg and neighboring towns, and the customs, rituals, traditions, and dress were faithfully kept in the new environment. My parents were part of a tightly knit community, the heart being the local synagogues and schools which helped provide for their needs.

My parents with me aged seven months.



## My Jewish upbringing



My earliest memories of a Jewish upbringing are of sabbath and dietary rituals. Friday night my mother lit the candles, reciting the prayers and moving her hands in a circular motion which fascinated me. I kept asking 'why,' and her answer was always that we were waving the evil spirits away. My father recited the kiddush over wine and challah bread, and I had warm feelings of love and togetherness.

Starting when I was about five, sometimes, instead of spending the sabbath at home with my parents, my maternal grandpa Chaim picked me up in his old Ford on Friday afternoons, and drove me the forty miles to Brakpan to spend the Sabbath with my maternal grandparents in their cottage. On the way he stopped the car in front of old hotels or apartment buildings and took a bottle of homemade wine and a loaf of bread inside while I waited in the car. I later learned that he gave these gifts to lonely divorced or widowed men living in poverty. In Brakpan he took me to his synagogue, and I sat next to him in a privileged seat reserved for the governor of the shul. I liked the rabbi and the cantor and the singing but often fell asleep when the rabbi talked from the podium, only to be awakened by my angry grandpa. Early on Saturday morning we attended sabbath services with my uncles while the women stayed home. I stared at the hanging chandeliers in the synagogue and often had daydreams.

Grandpa Chaim wore a three piece suit every day. He had a grey moustache. He listened to the evening news on a crackling old radio while carving himself small pieces of dark ryebread, and sipping dark tea in a glass while clenching a cube of sugar between his front teeth. In the winter, when even the inside of the home was cold, he walked to the end of the garden to sit in his car, which was warmed by the sun. He died when I was ten years old, and I was not allowed to go to the cemetery. I attended the evening shiva service at home, intrigued with the rituals of the men cutting their suit jackets with razor blades while praying, and singing. The mirrors and pictures in the house were covered with sheets and grandma sat on a sofa with the cushions removed while people shuffled by offering condolences.

## My Jewish education

I started Hebrew school at the age of six with Herman Kahn, a German Holocaust survivor. Looking back, I don't understand why my parents decided to send me to the Adath Yeshurun, a congregation of German immigrants who converted a house in Yeoville into a synagogue. My family origins were Eastern European Ashkenazi and, although I didn't know at the time, there were historic conflicts in belief between Western European and the Eastern European Orthodox Jews.

German Jews lived in wealthier parts of the city, where they established their own synagogues and businesses. Nevertheless, my relationship with Mr Kahn and the German-Jewish synagogue turned out to be good for me in many ways, mainly because Kahn and his wife took me under their wing and nurtured my faith. My father could not attend Saturday sabbath services because he had to work to maintain his business. The Kahns took me to their synagogue. I sat next to him while she sat behind a curtain at the back of the shul with the other women. I became embedded in the service, singing the songs, observing the rituals, wearing my new tallis and yarmulke, and loving

my teacher, Mr Kahn. After the service he and Mrs Kahn took me to their humble flat for lunch and we followed all the rituals of a truly orthodox life. Impressed with their piety I became more pious myself, wearing the garments Jews had worn for centuries.

My mother dropped a bombshell when she told me at age ten that I would have to move from Adath Yeshurun and Mr Kahn to the Lithuanian-oriented Yeoville synagogue (pictured right) in order to prepare for my bar mitzvah. I protested vigorously but she insisted that I was way behind what I needed to know. At Yeoville Hebrew School I discovered I was indeed far behind kids of my age in Hebrew but that gradually improved especially with the arrival of Mr Himmelstein in my life. He was almost as warm and loving as Mr Kahn, and he taught me how to sing my bar mitzvah portion, which I accomplished quite well in November 1956. I so enjoyed the experience that I wanted to become a cantor. But I felt the void on Saturday mornings when I attended the sabbath services on my own, without Mr Kahn and his wife.



## **My secular education**



For day school I first attended Yeoville Boys Primary School, a secular Anglican boys school Monday through Friday before attending Hebrew school in the afternoon. Mornings we sang

Christian hymns at the start of the day and read the King James bible in English. Afternoons I read the Old Testament with Mr Kahn in Hebrew. I was often confused by the interpretations of my non-Jewish teachers compared to Mr Kahn. My confusion grew when I wanted to play soccer and cricket like the other boys and that required that I missed Hebrew classes twice a week. My confusion grew more intense when selected to play in school sports teams, I had to choose between the sabbath rituals that I had grown up with and school sports. Sports won.

Most of my elementary school friends went to Athlone Boys High School, the feeder school for my district but based upon achievement, I was one of two chosen to attend King Edward VII High School for Boys (see above). That is where my religious conflicts reached a boiling point because of the strong Anglican orientation of the school. The teachers dressed in academic robes for morning assembly. The headmaster, a strict Englishman with an unforgiving demeanor led the singing of hymns, which I sang despite the strong Christian orientation. I stopped my daily orthodox Jewish religious rituals, including reciting prayers when washing my hands, going to sleep, waking up in the morning, and eating.



Here I am seated in the center, as captain of the second cricket team at KES.

I stopped feeling guilty when I played cricket and rugby on Saturdays. I started to question the dogmas of Jewish belief, particularly the certainty that the earth was only 5657 years old when anthropological, geological, and astronomical evidence showed unequivocal evidence of billions of years. I challenged Rabbi Lapin with this idea. He told me I couldn't ask such questions until I was 40 years old.



## Religious life at home

My father, a simple, honest man who believed in the Jewish way of life, taught me the religious rituals from a very young age. He led a disciplined life devoted to cleanliness of body and soul, relying on repetitive prayer, and observing all the holidays. The morning before the first night of Passover Dad gathered breadcrumbs in all corners of the house to prepare for the bread-limiting dietary rituals of the next week. He burned the breadcrumbs, held between two wooden planks in order to purify the house for the remembrance of Jews in Mosaic times escaping slavery in Egypt. For a week we ate unleavened bread.



The first night of Passover was always a big adventure for me, my two brothers and many cousins, children of my mother's siblings, from Brakpan. Grandpa Chaim did the ritual Haggadah service in the great room in Uncle Nathan's house in Brakpan. The children sat at a separate table. The adults sat on both sides of a U-shaped table, decorated with the best of the Passover tablecloths, silver, napkins, and crockery, adorned with plates filled with matzah, lamb's bone, roasted egg, charoset, bitter herbs, and green vegetables.



Grandpa rambled on and on, explaining, complaining, singing, and seemingly uninterested in the terrible hunger pangs of us children as the reading of the Haggadah continued until close to midnight. We had small pieces of matzo, and even a little kosher wine when instructed. Only when he said 'let's eat' could grandma and the other women serve the main meal of gefilte fish, hard boiled eggs, matzo ball soup, brisket, roasted chicken, vegetables, and potatoes. The meal ended well past midnight as I recall. The children wanted to sleep but grandpa insisted that we stay up and recite the grace, sing the songs, find, and eat the afikomen, a special piece of matzo that grandpa had hidden and we had to find, before we were allowed to go to sleep. There weren't enough beds, but it was great sleeping on blow-up mattresses close to each other on carpets in various rooms.

Another confusion that divided my religious life as a young boy was the fact that my father kept his early association with Doornfontein and New Doornfontein, an inner-city enclave popular with poor Jewish immigrants and the most densely settled Jewish areas in Johannesburg in the early part of the twentieth century. He kept insisting that we attend High Holiday services there at the Beth Hamedrash Hagodel (pictures below in about 1960) and not at the Yeoville synagogue, where I went to Hebrew school and celebrated my bar mitzvah.



The Beth Hamedrash Hagodel synagogue in Doornfontein was always packed on Kol Nidre night. Rabbi Kossowski and the cantor dressed in white robes, and there was a men's choir on the Bimah. The men wore tallises draped over the shoulders, not done on any other evening service in

the synagogue throughout the year, highlighting the importance of the Day of Atonement. I was not allowed to carry money, or even a prayerbook, or a bag for my tallis, or drive in a car – we all walked to the service and walked home. My dad would not let me fast until after I turned thirteen.

I sat silently the entire day next to him, trying to understand the Hebrew prayers and the rabbi's sermons in Yiddish, a dying language spoken by older congregants but not their children. He, and all the men around me, looked paler and more haggard as the day advanced and we came to the Neilah service, the last section of the day. My dad insisted on standing throughout the thirty-minute service, staying doggedly until the end, while others rushed to their cars to get home as quickly as possible after sunset to break the fast. The sounding of the shofar, an instrument made from a ram's horn, let the congregation know that it was all in God's hands as to whether we would live or die in the coming year.



### **We broke the Yom Kippur fast with Jenny Goldberg,**



Jenny was my father's maternal aunt, a loving, optimistic, pleasant, woman, who insisted on us starting the meal with sparkling mineral water mixed with milk. We were told to 'eat slowly,' making our way through the buffet beginning with kichel, a slightly sweet cracker made from eggs, flour and sugar, the dough rolled flat and cut into



bow-tie shapes, originating from the Ashkenazi Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, eaten with chopped herring decorated with the grated yolk and white of chopped hardboiled eggs.

She also served chopped liver, challah, cucumbers, tomatoes, and lettuce. We completed the meal with tea, coffee and teiglach, knotted pastries boiled in honeyed syrup, and a fruit salad. As a teenager I wanted steak, something easily available to the Goldbergs because Nathan owned the Goldenberg Kosher Butchery in Doornfontein.



I called him Uncle Nathan. A bald, rotund, joyful man (see Nathan and Jenny below) with a thick Polish accent, he occasionally took me to his shul, the Great Wolmarans street synagogue, a gigantic Byzantine style building with an enormous dome, built in 1914 (see below), with enough seats for 1500 worshippers, where he sang while crying, which struck me as a way to show his deep emotional connection to his faith and an immense reverence to God.

Enormously generous, Nathan loved to show me his butcher shop in Doornfontein, a busy fly-infested interior with coolers filled with kosher meat, and polony, a Bologna-style large beef sausage hanging in quantities from the ceiling. Nathan's

assistants, large silent men wearing blood-stained black rubber aprons, carved portions of kosher beef, lamb or chicken for pleading homemakers bargaining for lower prices. The assistant butchers were always generous with me, carving tasty pieces of biltong, an appropriately flavored South African dried beef delicacy which I loved.



### **The passing of the generations**

My paternal and maternal grandmas could not have been more different. **Mary Nathanson**, widowed at age 54 when my paternal grandpa died, chain-smoked cigarettes, did not speak much, lived in a hotel a few blocks from our house, and worked every day in my dad's petrol station. She gave me gifts, like my first microscope for my fifteenth birthday, but did not seem much interested in talking to me. She worked like that until a heart attack took her at age 76.



**Taube Weinberg**, on the other hand, frequently sat me down for hours to ask in her thick Lithuanian accent what I was doing and to tell me stories of her origins. She had left Lithuania at age sixteen, carrying dozens of pictures of gravestones of her family that had died in Zagare (like these on the left). Each member had a story. Her grandfather had been a rabbi. She told me in detail about cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, and I became engrossed in the rich storytelling, gleaning a

sense of their lives in a small town dominated by Russian rules, language, and lots of ‘forbiddens.’

All Taube’s siblings established lives in South Africa, each with engaging personalities and we visited them all periodically. Taube developed Hodgkin’s disease, a malignant disease of lymph nodes and the lymphatic system, when I was fifteen and my experience of her radiation treatments stimulated a lifelong passion for medicine and lymph nodes. Over three hundred close relatives came to celebrate her eightieth birthday in my uncle Louis’ backyard in Brakpan. She died six years later and is buried in the Brakpan Jewish cemetery next to Chaim.



## Religion vs Science

The geography of the Johannesburg Jewish community created a tool whereby the particular conservative, Lithuanian flavored Judaism was maintained and reproduced to ensure the continuity of this particular brand of faith and culture. But many Eastern European Jews in Johannesburg, faced with a restless modernizing culture discarded their Jewish identity.



My Jewish traditional life faded as I advanced through high school, where the daily secular challenges of mathematics, physics, chemistry, history, geography, and literature diluted my devotion to religious ritual. Competitive sport, Elvis Presley, chess, and girls took precedence over 'laying tefillin,' wearing tzitzit, and frequently thanking the Almighty for all the good things in life. The need to support my Jewish community, a prominent feature of the ancestral endurance of my faith, took a back seat. Modernization became the uncomplicated way for me to distance myself from my cultural group.

Here I am aged six.

Part of that change may have been influenced by the eleven years of Catholic girls' school that my mother had experienced. To this day, I don't quite understand why my strict Orthodox grandpa sent my mother, his only daughter, fifty miles away to a Catholic Girls boarding school in Potchefstroom, run by nuns. The youngest of six children, the only girl, perhaps he thought she would be safe and educated. The only Jewish girl in the school, she was excused from catechism classes, daily church mass and vespers with the other girls but she certainly retained a lot of the strict discipline imparted to her by the nuns, which she in turn used with her own children.

Punishment for 'wrongdoing' in our house was being locked in the bathroom for hours, or having my mouth washed out with soap if I said a bad word, or even an occasional spanking, actions that might these days result in a visit by social services and a reprimand or worse. But, despite her eleven-year exposure to a Catholic milieu, she somehow maintained her 'Jewishness.' She demonstrated her understanding of all the holiday and daily rituals, kept a kosher home, and strongly encouraged my early aspirations toward a higher Jewish life, even that of becoming a rabbi or a cantor. When science won out and I moved towards medicine, she was supportive.



(Left, I am starting my residency training)

She had been a volunteer in her late teens in the treatment of South African war wounded, helping doctors and nurses in hospitals devoted to those that survived the WW II battles in North Africa and Italy. The images she reflected upon and shared with me had a major impact on my decision to go to medical school.

I had been schooled into believing that the only way to maintain the Jewish community was for me to categorize myself in the same way as my parents and grandparents, and that I pass that onto my children. But modern life took over. I did not think about maintaining my identity for future generations. I chose to ignore and submerge my cultural and religious identity and, in so doing, to leave the community that raised me, an unavoidable feature of modernity itself.

### **Three types of Jews in Johannesburg**

I later learned that there were three types of Jews in the city and its suburbs, divided by geography into the southern suburbs, where the Jews were poor and had a thriving religious community of butchers, teachers, carpenters, electricians, mechanics, plumbers, shop assistants and other fairly menial jobs. Then there was the transitional area around Yeoville, Hillbrow, Bellevue, and Bellevue East, that housed many of the more established Jewish families. Then, in the north-eastern suburbs of Houghton, Orchards, Norwood, Highlands Park, Parktown, Kensington, and Sandringham, resided the rich Jews who had made it in business or the professions. They drove expensive cars, lived in large mansions with spacious gardens, enjoyed exclusive memberships in expensive sports clubs, and took overseas trips.

### **Wits Medical School**

Many of my medical school classmates, and the professors and lecturers who taught us were Jewish. (We were accepted to Medical School based on our matric results, so it often happened at the time that over half the students were Jewish). None of us discussed this important fact, nor did we marvel that we came from a Lithuanian Jewish culture steeped in traditions that promoted learning.

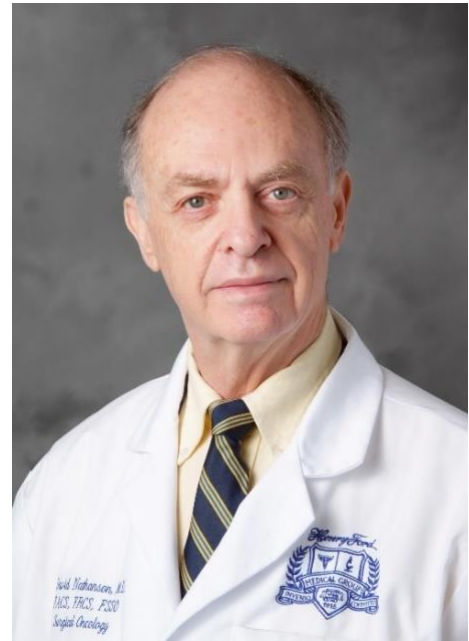


**Philip Tobias**, a brilliant, world-renowned paleoanthropologist (seen right, with and a humanoid skull), led the Anatomy department. I never could tell whether he practiced Judaism, but we attended the compulsory Saturday morning anatomy dissection hall which broke all the rules of the sabbath.

**Harry Seftel, Mosie Suzman, Louis Berman, Leo Schamroth, Jerry Jersky, Irving Lissoos, Arthur Rubenstein, Myron Lange, Michael Applebaum**, and others were outstanding teachers and they all worked on the sabbath, ignoring the call of their ancestral religious origins. I followed their lead into a world dominated by science, a science which constantly questioned faith.

Two Wits medical school graduates of the late 1940's and early 1950's both Jewish, **Aaron Klug** (BSc, honorary DSc) 1982 *Nobel Prize in Chemistry*, and **Sydney Brenner** (BSc, BSc Hons, honorary DSc). 2002 *Nobel Prize in Medicine* went on to become Nobel laureates, an astonishing accomplishment when we think that just two generations prior to them they would not have been allowed to attend medical school or even secular high schools in the 'old country.'

By entering the macho, militaristic general surgery program run by Professor D J DuPlessis at the Johannesburg General Hospital I further detached my mindset from the faith-based, social justice-oriented outlook of my youth. By the time I completed my surgical training in Johannesburg I was fully embedded in my profession, and completely removed from my faith. I was fully open to advancing my career scientifically. The lure of an American life pushed me rapidly to leave the comforts of Johannesburg.



Emigration at age thirty-one to Los Angeles in 1975, provided an exciting opportunity to further my scientific adventures at UCLA. Instead of the fully trained, competent surgeon that I felt I had become in Johannesburg, I was once again at the lowest rung of a career ladder because I elected to do fellowships in Immunology and Surgical Oncology, disciplines that I had not previously experienced. The academic demands felt like I was in a terrifying whirlwind. In addition, I experienced the insecurities of the immigrant experience.

### **How science and modern life filtered out the religious Jew – but not the Jewishness.**

Away from my South African certainties I experienced 'future shock,' a state of mind in which I perceived too much change in too short a time. The accelerated rate of technological and social change, and information overload was stressful and led me to seek the remembered comfort of my Jewish way of life.

In my many transformations over time I have always strongly affiliated with other Jews. I want to be buried with my fellow Jews in a Jewish Cemetery. My many efforts to understand the meanings of life have driven me to study 'religions,' including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. I even studied Talmud in the 1990s with an Orthodox Rabbi here in Detroit. I explored in depth the theologies of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber. I strongly support local charitable Jewish organizations, including the Holocaust Memorial Center three miles from my home. However, even though I tried about 25 years ago to regain my ritual beliefs from childhood, to the extent of joining an Orthodox Shul, there were too many conflicts in my beliefs and value systems to continue. But this is a story for another time.

**Saul David Nathanson, MB BCh Wits 1966.**

**Written in Detroit, August 2023**