



My Jewish Connections

01/11/2023 | Robert W. Coughlin

Joseph Epstein recently gave himself the sobriquet of pious Jewish agnostic and explained his pride as a member of a “club... whose members have survived every persecution and social obstacle over the centuries and along the way has produced an inordinate number of the world’s philosophical, scientific and literary geniuses.” [Pious Agnosticism as a Form of Judaism, WSJ, September 7, 2023]. His writing awakened memories of the many Jews who touched my life, even as a child growing up in a largely Irish Catholic neighborhood in Brooklyn in the 1930s and 40s. During that time, I was often asked if I was related to the “radio priest”, Father Charles Coughlin who had become well known nationally for his antisemitic broadcasts. No known relation.

My first Jewish connection began before I was born in 1934. My mother had lost her father at age 15 and her family struggled economically during the great depression when job openings were few. In 1931 she responded to a newspaper ad and joined a throng of other job applicants at the newly opened Empire State Building. After a preliminary screening in the lobby, she was sent to the next stage at an upper floor but accidentally got off the elevator at a lower floor. By luck she was welcomed there as a final stage applicant and shortly found herself with a new job as executive assistant to Lewis Rosenstiel, founder and CEO of Schenley, one of the country’s larger liquor companies (later incorporated as Schenley Industries). At that time during Prohibition, Schenley produced medicinal liquor at several distilleries and my mother worked with Rosenstiel to acquire a growing inventory of additional bonded whiskey stored in warehouses as he planned for Repeal which came in 1933, the year my mother married my father.

Schenley gave our family, living in a middle-class Brooklyn neighborhood, a window into a glamorous, affluent world unknown to our neighbors and my playmates. I recall visiting Conyers Farm, Rosenstiel’s thousand-acre estate in Greenwich CT and attending a party on his yacht moored at City Island. On that occasion I met Bernard Gimble who gave me a dime and advised me to invest it. Gimbles was once the largest chain of department stores in the country and the creator of the Thanksgiving Day parade. I also recall visits to Schenley’s executive offices on the 34th floor of the Empire State Building where I marveled at one of the world’s earliest TV sets, although there were few broadcast programs to watch at that time.

On a tip from my mother her cousin Ruth found a job at Schenley. One day Rosenstiel came to the office directly from his yacht dressed informally in what looked like deck-hand attire. He was walking around talking to employees when cousin Ruth dropped by for a visit, mistook Rosenstiel for a window washer and engaged him in conversation about the enormous number of windows that had to be kept clean in the Empire State building. Rosenstiel played along with the situation and Ruth departed with no clue she had been talking to the “big boss.” Imagine her surprise when she learned later who the window washer was.

There were also Jewish contacts near our house in Brooklyn. Frieda and Abe ran a store that sold penny candy, newspapers, and magazines; the store also had a soda fountain where they served up malt shakes and egg creams, a New York specialty soda that contains neither egg nor cream. Herb Wiener delivered our prescriptions from a pharmacy owned by his dad who helped me replenish chemicals for my chemistry set when they ran low. I also had a wonderful dentist, Enoch Reich who talked to me about dentistry and science while he worked on me with radio station

WQXR playing classical music we both loved. Dr. Reich told me one day he was being investigated by the FBI who had paid him a recent visit. He was suspected of spying because of the cryptic messages he mailed on postcards. The messages were moves for the chess games he played against distant opponents.

My father was a golf addict. As a teenager he could not afford to play golf but learned to play by secretly swinging the clubs of members he caddied for at the Crescent Club on the Brooklyn waterfront, now converted into public parkland. Later, he and his brother played regularly as a foursome with two Jewish friends, Al Levy and Marty Korman, at the Dyker Beach municipal course in Brooklyn. I learned from caddy talk that they bet large sums on their play. Marty owned a driving range near Coney Island in Brooklyn that I often patronized. Unlike my father, I was a terrible golfer and sliced, hooked, and topped the balls regularly. I recall Marty would appear with a complementary bucket of balls, get behind me, guide my swing and soon have me hitting straight soaring golf shots. I learned later he had been a teaching golf professional, a fine career for a mensch like Marty.

My father was one of the fortunate few with regular union employment during the Depression; he worked as a mechanical tradesman in a technology related to print advertisements. That technology, called stereotyping, enabled newspapers across the country to run the same ads and comics on the same day, a technology that became obsolete in the digital age. He also worked as a commissioned salesman for his company and his customers were account managers in advertising agencies. The care and feeding of those customers entailed lavish entertainment and golf outings. Some customers were Jews like Herman Kornblum but Herman was not one for lavish treatment. He was a mensch and an accomplished musician who played regularly in a chamber music group. When Herman discovered my interest in classical music, he showered me with 33 rpm recordings to enlarge my knowledge of many classical composers. During lunches with my father Herman and I often discussed classical music, not golf to my father's dismay.

During my college years in the 1950s I was very fortunate to get a summer job with Schenley at a small lab in the Empire State Building. Schenley's chief technical officer was Dr. A.J. Liebman a rather distinguished scientist and an acquaintance of my mother but I like to think getting that job was also helped by the fact I had good grades as a chemistry major at Fordham. My supervisor, George Rosen taught me many subtleties of lab procedure and I progressed to doing analytical procedures in addition to mundane duties like washing glassware. I also learned some Yiddish words. The lab was engaged in analysis of Shenley's products that were returned with complaints by consumers who then received a replacement bottle. Most of the bottles had been partly consumed and some of them contained little more than enough to conduct the laboratory assays. Much of the returned whiskey proved to be of good quality and that whiskey found its way into TGIF office parties.

Among my classmates at Fordham the only Jew I recall is Ed Lehman, a very friendly and easygoing person. Some of our fellow students surmised, erroneously, that there was a connection to the Lehman Brothers investment house. Ed went on to earn a PhD from Columbia and has had a fruitful career as a sociology prof at NYU.

After Fordham I became a graduate student at Cornell and got to know two Jewish students in the same department of chemical engineering. There was a natural affinity because the three of us came from New York City. Dennis Poller and I joined three other students to rent a house near campus. Dennis was entertaining and full of fun. We regaled our housemates with tales of the Big Apple. Dennis used his best Yiddish accent and I affected an Irish brogue. We often included farces about Michael J Quill of the New York Transport Workers Union who railed against the city in a notably strident brogue; his touch phrase was, "No contract, no work!" Long after the Cornell experience, my wife and I would delight in Dennis' annual holiday letters that featured vey amusing tales of his family's latest experiences. I also recall that I introduced Dennis to his wife

Merle, whom I knew from previously living in Cascadilla Hall, a coed graduate residence.

Cornell had more Jewish students than I had ever encountered before. I think their presence was related to a strong classical music scene I found at Cornell. There was a music room in Willard-Strait Hall where a disc jockey took requests to play only classical records, and the students listened while studying and looking over each other. Cornell's radio station had a program called Marathon that played classical music continuously for 240 hours during each examination period. Dennis disdained classical music but came around when I played him a record of Mozart's clarinet concerto with Benny Goodman as soloist; he could accept classical music played by a jazzman.

Harold Reisman, another fellow graduate student in chemical engineering displaced from New York City, suffered from the bitter winters at Cornell. Hal had an interesting sardonic wit and I remember his observation, "In the kingdom of the blind, the blind man is king." a saying that appears to have its origin in the Genesis Rabbah. Hal left Cornell with a M.S. and returned to the big city to earn a Ph.D. at Columbia.

I married near the end of my Cornell studies. Soon thereafter my wife Roberta and I set sail for Germany where I had a Fulbright fellowship that supported me to do post-doctoral research at the University of Heidelberg. There we became fast friends with Lily Hindley who was pursuing a doctorate in Czech studies. Lily was born in Russia from which her family fled pogroms and settled in China where her father died as a result of wartime hostilities. Lily's mother then married a GI and the family settled in California where she received much of her early education.

Many weekends Lily joined us in excursions to nearby cultural destinations, together with my research director, Professor Peter Boehm, a German national who had detailed historical and regional knowledge and took it upon himself to plan the trips and serve as tour guide. I recall Lily alerted us to a concert we all attended in the inner courtyard of the ruins of Heidelberg Castle. The musicians played several Brandenburg concertos in that romantic setting enhanced by sunset and nightfall visible through the defenestrated castle walls. That experience kindled in me a greater appreciation of Bach that continues to this day.

Lily later became an interpreter for the United Nations in Geneva and we corresponded with her for many years until her death. She wrote an interesting book about her childhood but I believe it was never published. We still have an early draft.

Lily had a sweet, attractive, and very feminine aura that could obscure her sharp mind and acerbic wit. She told us she overheard some students (all German males) grumbling that she had bewitched a prominent professor who had highly praised her seminar presentation. Her detractors employed the German verb "becircen" which derives from Circe, a sorceress in ancient Greek mythology who changed Odysseus' men into swine when he visited her island of Aegaea on his return from the Trojan wars. Lily confronted her detractors by explaining that, in contrast to Circe's spells she, Lily, changed swine into men.

We returned from Germany with a newborn daughter and I took a job at Exxon and then at Isotopes-Teledyne. At Exxon I shared an office with Roy Lieber, a smart recent graduate who regaled his colleagues with tales about his weekend dates and he spent much time on the telephone with his female friends. He seemed quite pleased when I pointed out that his name translated to "King Lover." He probably had heard that observation before. In my next job at Isotopes, Incorporated I worked on analyzing environmental samples for radionuclides. The company had been analyzing the radioactivity measurements by tedious hand calculations. I hired Myrna Fein a recent physics graduate of Yeshiva University. Together we developed a computer program to do all those calculations. It was early days for computers and the program and input data were in the form of punched cards. Myrna would regularly take a deck of punched cards for processing at a nearby computer service center and return with a printout of the results. It was a

pleasure working with Myrna. I recall koshering utensils by boiling when Myrna and her husband came for dinner.

I left Isotopes to take an academic position in chemical engineering at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. A few years later Marvin Charles joined the faculty after completing his doctoral studies at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute which is now part of New York University. Marv and I quickly found common ground as former New Yorkers in a stuffy department where five of the profs were conservative and of German ancestry. We collaborated writing a proposal to the National Science Foundation which awarded us a large grant for research work related to biotechnology. As co-investigators we used those funds to support many graduate and undergraduate students to do lab research. Based on that work, we and the students co-authored at least 15 scientific publications. Marv was very enterprising; he told me that even as a child he arranged to collect tips by stationing himself at a mikveh so he would be the first to be seen by clients as they departed. He told me he supported himself during college years by delivering bon voyage gifts to vacationers departing the metropolitan airports. We reminisced about New York City esoterica such as egg cream sodas, deli crown sandwiches and stickball played with a red rubber "Spaldeen" ball. Marv and I shared a love of classical music. He had a record player in his office and I recall it would play the same music repeatedly. There was a stretch of time when I heard only Bach's sacred cantatas in his office. I warned him that if he listened to enough of that music he was going to fall in love with Jesus. That is an example of the kind of irreverent banter that enlivened our collaboration. Of other Jewish profs at Lehigh, I recall especially Les Spering, a very helpful and friendly person who taught me much about polymers.

I left Lehigh to become head of the chemical engineering department at the University of Connecticut. Klaus, one of my graduate students came along and completed his doctoral work at UConn. A German citizen, Klaus had received his diploma in engineering from the University of Karlsruhe. A romance sprung up between Klaus and Miriam, a UConn psychology professor. That led to marriage and Klaus' formal conversion to Judaism. In those years my wife and I spent many fun-filled good times with Klaus and Miriam, a vibrant couple. Some other Jews I encountered in CT were Marty Fox who expounded about the inner game of tennis, Eli Dabora who told me about his childhood in Iraq and taught me some French, David Shamash who explained to me the duties of a shamash, Paul Norman who related how his blended family celebrated Jewish and Christian holidays, Steve Solomon who gave me helpful dental advice and Larry Bernstein my mother's physician during her last days. I played tennis with Marty, Paul, Steve, and Larry. I played pickleball and tennis with many other Jewish court buddies.

As I reminisce about the many members of that club about which Joseph Epstein wrote, I realize I am excluded from membership. But that strikes me as fitting, considering that Jews were excluded from many clubs in years gone by.

Robert W. Coughlin is Professor Emeritus of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at University of Connecticut, serving also as Department Head for several years.