



“A State of Me”

By Naphtali Rosenfeld

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Over the years I have acquired the habit-whether it's good or bad- I don't really know, let's just call it a habit of saying a few words at birthdays and such. Now-the birthday today happens to be my own-this, of course, is quite a different Maisse. My first impulse was: No way, impossible, don't. This would have meant fighting the habit; but mindful of my doctor's advice to avoid tensions of any kind, I had to give in. Meaning: there are going to be a few words-as a matter of fact-quite a few. But it won't be your ordinary tribute to the celebrant, you know, the kind that rhymes, full of pleasant things, compliments and good wishes. It is more like a State-of-the-Union-message..... a state-of-Me-message. But where to begin?

Our period in history appears to be marked by exceptionable turbulence and violence. Born during or shortly after World War 1 into a Germany, defeated, depressed and torn by hatred and convulsions, then expelled from it and the nourishment we received from it in our formative years, the new life and struggle, hopes in the new beginning in Palestine. Then Israel with its hopes and disappointments. World War 2 with the horrors it brought to the world-especially for us. The Holocaust. Leaving Israel for another new beginning: The States. Yes, it is quite a package-but the violence and upheavals which caused these wanderings are really not so unique. Looking back into human history one soon comes to realize: Human existence on this earth during 5000 years of recorded history-and-probably-back to the cave man was spent in violence of one kind or another. Each period was blessed with its own Gengis Khans, its Great Alexanders, its Great Napoleons, its Hannibals and Neros. There were the religious wars which lasted for decades with their special blend of brutality and hatreds, the pogroms through the ages, slavery, Leibeigenschaft. As for sadistic pleasures: The Romans fed their prisoners to the lions, and we are told they greatly enjoyed it, the Romans, not the prisoners. The lions might have liked it, too. The violence of our time is marked by the dimensions, the large numbers of victims and the advanced methods by which people are turned into victims. The forces behind it all remained the same through the ages: Man's inability to cope with his fears, his prejudices, his exaggerated selfishness, his instincts.

But all this I did not know yet when I was born into a very large family in Cologne during World War 1, the sixth of what was later to become a brood of 8 brothers. What remained in my memory most is the poverty. But not only the poverty of the body, the drabness of the dwelling, the clothes, the food-at times even hunger-but the poverty of the spirit, too. My father came to Cologne at the turn of the century. Poor, without profession, without the language, and-possessed by the accumulated experience of generations in the Polish settlement-he carried with him his own Ghetto. Even his religion was mostly fear. Fear of punishment, if you do not obey the laws. There were so many Don'ts. I still remember the "Me tunich" (Man darf das nicht tun. You are not allowed to do that. And if you do there is going to be terrible punishment.) When I was three years old my grandparents from my mother's side took me into their house to live with them for a few years. Why I was singled out for that I do not know to this day. In my memory my grandfather still figures as a giant of a person. I do not mean this physically-though he was of big stature.

He radiated a glow, a warmth. He was a chassidic rabbi, a very honored man; he presided over his own congregation. He had a synagogue in his own house. He, also, was the chasan. Oh, could he pray. As small as I was I could clearly perceive the difference between the religion in my parent's home and the religion practiced in my grandfather's house. One event stands out in my memory from this time. I must have been four years old and quite advanced in Jewish studies. A famous Chossid from Poland had arrived in Cologne and me-the little "Wonder-boy" was to be presented to him in all his glory. My grandfather woke me at two o'clock one night and took me down to the living room. There, assembled around the table, was a large number of black-bearded men, among them the famous one. On the table a lighted candle next to an open book, a Chumesch or Gemorrah. I still see myself staring down onto the book, surrounded by these eager faces. Whether I passed the test or whether I flunked-I do not remember anymore. All I remember is my fervent desire to go back to sleep. I still wonder today with what ease I removed myself from religious life the first chance I had in spite of the influences coming from this grandfather of mine and the veneration I had for him.

The first time we travelled to Cologne I looked up the graves of my grandparents. There they lied, side by side in a little forgotten cemetery on the outskirts of town. Two corroded tombstones. My grandmother died in 1921, my grandfather in 1922. It was a deeply moving experience.

After my grandparent's death I was taken home to my parents and brothers. But I never really became part of the family anymore. I stayed a stranger among my own family. The final break came, when-at the age of ten-I was placed in a Jewish children's home in a different part of Cologne. The seven years that followed now were for me years of discovery, opening for me a new world. For the first time I make contact with a different kind of Jews. These had been living in Germany for generations, integrated, alert, part of the world around them. And for the first time in my life I came into contact with the non-Jewish German. I was enrolled in a non-Jewish High School. Though storm clouds were gathering over Germany at that time, and the German Jews in particular, my own world during these years was miraculously untouched by all this. I longingly look back to this time, my own Shangri-La, the years of innocence. My life in the home which gave me a feeling of shelter and haven, my life in school among non-Jews who accepted and respected me-all was good. I was given treasures, which were to be my companions for the rest of my life. I discovered the world of the written word, the book. Reading, reading. I developed a feeling for the German language. I tasted it. The word, the sentence, the verse. I had never experienced anything like it. Later, in Israel, I was on the verge of gaining a similar relationship with the Hebrew language. But about this later. I entered the world of the giants of German literature of that time: Hesse, Werfel, Wasserman, Stefan Zweig, Zuckmayr-so many and so exciting. A whole universe of beauty, of values, of teachings. And I was given the treasure of music, a world of

it's own, magnificent and powerful, soothing and exhilarating. And I was introduced to the world of the outdoors, Landschaft. We would go on long hikes, sometimes for weeks, along the Rhine valley. We would stay overnight in old castles, converted into youth hostels, overlooking the river and the vineyards. Evenings we would join the German youngsters, the Wandervoegel, in singing and talking. There was a camaraderie. Sure, I know now, all these youngsters would join the Hitler Youth or the S.A. Maybe, I lived in a world which did not exist in reality, but for me, at that time it was real. I was happy in it while it lasted.

Here is a scene 10 years later. The place is Kibbutz Hasorea, close to Mishmar Haemek. The head of the children's home in Cologne came to the Kibbutz to visit me and Reni. Lothar's first wife. She, too, had spent a few years in the home in Cologne. Therese Wallach was her name, an unmarried woman, whose whole life was her work, her children in the home. The year was 1938. Friends in Israel urged her not to return to Germany. Her answer was: How can I desert the children which were still in Germany? At the end of her visit I had to bring her back to the railroad station in Schech-a-Brek, a few miles from the Kibbutz. We had no car in the Kibbutz at that time. I remember the scene vividly. We sat on the wagon, I guided the horse, a rifle over my shoulder, next to me the two women. All was so ominous, so threatening. The situation in Palestine was very tense, no one knew what the future would bring. The woman, so lonely and unprotected, heading back to the Germany of that time. At the station we had to wait for the train; then it came. She entered the train, so forlorn. We drove back to the Kibbutz, deeply saddened. Therese Wallach perished in concentration camp.

The years 1932-1934, fateful years for us all in Germany, I spent in entirely different surroundings, the Jewish agricultural school in Ahlem near Hannover. This was my first stepping-out of the protected environment I had enjoyed so far. The teaching staff was all non-Jewish. The head of the school, a Mr. Rosenblatt, who had served in the German army during World War I, and who wore his Iron Cross medals at every suitable and unsuitable occasion, belonged to the C.V. - he had strong patriotic feelings for the German fatherland. Later, when the Nazis came to power, he hoped for special treatment because of that. But he, too, perished in a concentration camp, Iron Cross and all. During these two years I had very little contact with the outside world and the political events there, but -still- this outside world came to us in a very strange way. We had a communist cell in our school, very active. Probably, under guidance from the Communist party in Hannover, it instigated an open revolt in the school. The whole thing was quite childish, but it could have had serious consequences for all of us. It all happened two months before the Nazi takeover. The communist paper in Hannover, trying to gain political advantages from the incident, printed blown-up reports about so-called intolerable conditions in school, mostly unfounded. The school, which was little known until this time, all of a sudden found itself in the political limelight. The police was called in.

14

There were searches. We were on strike. The same night we were hauled out of bed at three o'clock in the morning, ordered down to the basement of the building and, dressed in our pajamas and nightgowns, had to stand in line in front of a German country policeman, splendid in his uniform, complete with a fabulous helmet and Kaiser Wilhelm moustache, who tried, in a fatherly way, to talk sense into us. One of his arguments: "Weltanschauung, mein Sohn Wilhelm, der jetzt 21 Jahre alt ist, hat noch nie eine Weltanschauung gehabt und es ging ihm doch ganz gut dabei." The whole scene, the semi dark basement, the shivering line of sleepy boys in their pajama-finesse, talked to by this mustached symbol of authority-it was so unbelievably unreal-but it was real. What was so frighteningly brought home to me then: With what ease a small group of determined, active people can make others do what they had no intention of doing.

Another event from that time, which, more than anything, drove home to me what had happened to us Jews through the Nazi takeover: The man in charge for our professional training was a Mr. Hector, the Obergaertner. A man with exceptional knowledge in his field, a good educator, a very dignified person. At 8 o'clock in the morning he took the roll-call. He checked attendance, and he assigned duties for the day. Generally we were always on time. Sometimes a student would be late a minute or two. The man usually accepted these little irregularities gracefully. This particular morning, March 1933, he took the roll-call again. Two of the students were late by a minute. He uttered two words: Typisch juedisch. (Typically Jewish) Really no earthshaking event. Ordinarily one would dismiss the incident as unimportant. But these words, coming from a man, held in such high regard by all of us for his integrity, these two words were a harbinger of things to come. For the first time I felt the menace, for the first time I knew the feeling of being Hefker, of being outside the protection of the law. The terrible injustice of it. Being late is not typically Jewish. If a man of his intelligence and decency was capable of joining the pack-what was left for us? Two words-and a whole world collapsed.

A vignette from that same period: The Werkleute, the group of young people, which later was to start Kibbutz Hasorea in Palestine, had some of its members on Hachscharah with German farmers in the vicinity of Hannover, among them our friend Lothar. One of the basics of the teachings of this group was the belief, that any improvement in human relations had to start in a small circle. By creating good close relationships among the few, then-spreading the gospel to larger and larger circles-one can hope to bring about a change for the better. To achieve this, we, the Werkleute, had to meet each other for long intimate conversations and soul searchings. One night Lothar came from his farm by bike for such conversations with me. We walked around the school grounds, deeply immersed in talk. I have no idea anymore what we talked about, but it must have been very profound. I am sure the betterment of the whole world must have started that very night. When Lothar left, and I tried to enter the building, the door was already locked. So I did, what we always did in these situations, I climbed up the drainpipe leading to the large bedroom. I was about to climb over the bannister of the terrace leading to the bedroom when something happened to me. I woke up 15' below on the ground, bruised and pained all over my body. I shall always remember Lothar; my soul and my body will, especially my right foot and my back.

I arrived in Haifa on my 19th birthday, April 23 1934. The next four years were going to be the most intense of my whole life. Experiences of half a lifetime to be crammed into these four. With the Werkleute, whom I joined during my stay in Ahlem, I was to be involved in the founding of a new Kibbutz, a communal society, the culmination of dreams-mostly of the romantic kind-a social and personal experiment to be carried out in an environment, fascinating and hostile at the same time. Within a week of my leaving Germany I was not my own self anymore. I was to become a small part in an historical happening. I was guided by forces over which I had little control. I became a soldier, years before I donned any uniform. But all this I did not perceive as a burden. I was a willing and dedicated member of an idealistic group of people, ready to take upon themselves any hardships to build a new life, a society of their own within the larger framework of the Jewish State. These four years I felt what I never had felt before or after: The daily life with its joys and sorrows was not only an existence, but a fulfillment at the same time. It meant participating in a common effort, sacrificing. I went into it with all my youthful enthusiasm. During all these years I retained the hope and certainty, that the new life would-eventually-turn out to be identical with the dreams I had about it.

A footnote: Trying to put down on paper some of the experiences which shaped my life, I first encountered difficulties. There are so many little happenings, confusing in their variety and importance. One has to find the general characteristic of a certain period in one's life. The single event should only serve as illumination to it, the illustration.

My own discovery of the Hebrew language and literature. Bialik, Brenner, Agnon. The first planting of little pine trees in the hills overlooking our camp to come. I saw these trees 25 years later on a visit to the Kibbutz. A heart-warming experience. The trees had become a forest.

Morning the Kibbutz walked down the hill to the campsite to be built. In the afternoon all climbed back up to the fortress. For a period of two months I walked against the traffic. When, in the afternoon, they all came up the hill, I, accompanied by a little puppy dog, a rifle and some food, walked down the hill. My duty was to guard the camp under construction during the night. I never felt so lonely in my whole life. Me, my puppy and all this threatening darkness around me. The Kibbutz later settled in the valley and became a very successful agricultural and industrial enterprise.

I have to mention one event now, which later contributed to my decision to leave the Kibbutz. The land on which we were going to settle, had been bought from an absentee landlord by the Jewish National Fund. An Arab village, tena farmers, which had been there probably for centuries, still was occupying part of our future campsite. As a matter of fact: we never could have built the camp without this piece of land. The Arabs used the site for harvesting procedure. The year was 1937, one year into the most serious disturbances the country has seen. There were many reports of attacks on Jewish settlements. The part we were sitting on was strategically indefensible. We needed the land, the Arabs needed the land. A confrontation where both sides were right. Then, one night, after long and careful preparations, while the village was asleep, we took the land. A new barbed wire fence was set up, movable structures were carried over. By that time the Arabs noted anything, a fait accompli had been established. Then came what I will never forget. The whole village, men, women and children massed along the fence. Crying and wailing went on all through the night. I thus was witness and participant in a human tragedy which had no peaceful solution. I could not live with it - and the prospect of further tragedies of that kind. One year later I left the Kibbutz. Looking back to this incident now - I still feel the dilemma I was in. I felt very uncomfortable doing what I did that night. Beyond the fact that there was no way of refusing to participate - there was a strict military discipline in the Kibbutz; the local commander of the Haganah could order one to do it - besides this fact I, myself, saw the necessity of doing what we did in order to survive. But all this did not make it easier on my conscience. My vision of the building of the state was a peaceful one - very naive probably. Since I was not religious I could not claim that God had promised and given us this land (as the settlers on the West Bank claim today) I was not ready for the " It's me or you situation. I do not know whether I am ready for it even now. I would probably try - in order not to be forced to be a participant in a situation, where both sides are right - I would try to remove myself from it, if at all possible. All these years in Palestine and Israel I never ran away from danger. I did a lot of volunteering in very tricky situations, in the Kibbutz and later. But this was not a question of fighting an outside enemy, this meant fighting with one's own conscience, much harder.

VI

1934-global economic depression. A group of young people, ranging in age from 18-25 years, most of them coming from wealthy Jewish families in Germany, on-going professionals, college students or college graduates, having grown up in totally protected environments. General characteristic: Intelligent, without any background of physical work, apart from a short time on a farm, non-aggressive. The new environment: Hostile, primitive, extreme climate conditions, tropical diseases-Malaria, Furunculosis, Hepatitis, Dysentery. Extremely hard work. The tool: the Turiah, forbidden in its use in England because it can damage the heart, but gracefully permitted in the colonies, backbreaking competition with the hardened Arab worker. Two hours of walking to work in the morning in the citrus groves, two hours of walking back home in the afternoon, utterly exhausted and drained. Joined at the table in the dining hall by flies and roaches for a feast of bread, oil and salt. Above us, in the crawl space between the ceiling and the roof the running noises of large colonies of rats. Living conditions: four people to a room or tent, strangers to each other, boys and girls in the same quarters, not supposed to act like boys and girls-a special twist in social experimentation. But there was a stoic acceptance of it all. We had a vision and a certainty. And there were highlights of joy, of singing and dancing; there were lectures and courses. And we had a piano. Two accomplished pianists among us. The sounds of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. Walks to the ocean, swimming in moonlight, first tentative personal encounters. During this time I met Felix, joint walks in the Eucalyptus grove, joint endurance of Mosquito bites.

Our group spent two years in Chederah. After that came the great event: Joknam. We were going to settle on our own land. 1936: the move from Chederah to Joknam. Our possessions at that time: 1 Ford truck, our Sorgenkind, more out of than in service. And we owned a horse and a wagon, which had to be taken on a torturous voyage through Arab towns and villages. We were five people on the wagon, heavily armed with one little pistol, hidden among the stuff. It took us a full day to reach our destination, never sure, whether we would make it alive.

The land, our land, was in the valley, along the road from Haifa to Mishmar Haemek. Our initial living quarters were in a fortresslike structure on a hill leading to the Carmel, a large square court, surrounded on four sides by a continuous one-story structure. Large rooms, most of them having been used as stables. No running water. Crowded together, twenty to a stable, mattress to mattress, no privacy whatsoever-but still happy. There was intense communal life during that time, continuous discussions about a million things. At that time I held my first public office. I was in charge of the communal meetings. I think I did it quite well. I developed the skill-when confusion reigned in the discussions, no productive conclusion or end in sight-I developed the skill to stop it all, to formulate the various positions in a few clear sentences, to make suggestions of my own and thus lead the sessions to a successful conclusion. No easy task. Felix is my witness.

Highlights during this time: Spring flowers in the foothills of the Carmel, a profusion of color, of shape, of fragrance. Sounds of Mozart coming from a tent in the court, a record player saved from destruction and carried along hard roads.

In 1938 I left the Kibbutz to join Felix in Jerusalem where she went one year earlier to learn at the Hadassah. Leaving the Kibbutz meant much, much more for me than just changing my mailing address. In the Kibbutz living meant living a mission, outside of it living meant just existing. In the Kibbutz one was part of a much larger unit in number and in purpose. The time that follows now, the years 1938-1948, the most dramatic in human history, became the grandiose setting for the play called "The Rosenfelds in Jerusalem." Now, a safe distance in time and time from the Jerusalem of these years, I see ourselves, busy at a million things of daily living, finding work, finding shelter, finding friends, finding enjoyments, taking everything very seriously, only dimly aware of the events outside our little anthep. Sure, we followed the news from Europe, the declaration of war, the fall of Poland, the pact between Stalin and Hitler, the fall of France-and closer to our own turf the campaign in North Africa with the Germans close to Alexandria-but somehow, one did not grasp the dreadful seriousness and implications of these events for all of us. Looking back now, with all the knowledge of what was going on in Europe at that time, one is faced again with the cruel reality of the "Gleichzeitigkeit", the fateful importance of where one is at a given time. While we were playing our little games of life in Jerusalem, millions were being put to death in the camps in Europe. The reverse happened later, too-though in a milder form: While fighting as a soldier in 1948 among the smoldering ruins of Ramat Rachel I was keenly aware of there being a Switzerland in another part of the world.

Jerusalem of 1938: A brilliant kaleidoscope of colors. Humankind in all its exciting variety. The British, respected, hated and envied. The Arabs, mysterious and dreadful. The Sephardic Jew, their appearance, dress and customs. The Chasidic Jews, their appearance, dress and customs. The world of the Churches, the priests. The Eastern European Jews, not the Ghetto Jew anymore, these the Jews of determination and accomplishment. The proud world of the Sabra, healthy and self-confident. And we, the Jews from Western Europe with our own values and customs. All this was a scene of never ending interaction and excitement. Add to this the scenic beauty of the city and its surroundings, the monasteries on the hills around the city, the mystic of the old city, its awe-inspiring architecture, the mosques, the synagogues, the churches, the battlements and all this implanted in one's ever present awareness of its fateful history.

Our life? We were young, making a living was hard-but we needed so little. No one owned much, success was measured in very small units. One did not rent an apartment, one rented a room. Every year on Mcharram, about the month of February-according to local custom-one looked for and rented a room in another part of the city. Why? I do not know-one just did it. The first move we could carry all our belongings on our bicycles. The year after we had to hire a two-wheeled cart to move our richness. The next year we even needed a horse-drawn wagon with four wheels. As you can see: we became affluent.

Yes, we lived our life, created our own world. In June 1940, 40 years ago Felix and I got married, a very unceremonious ceremony at City-Hall. We had the affair catered, we each had an icecream cone. I am glad we then decided to make the voyage on this earth together. We have been good companions to each other all these years.

Our last address in Jerusalem, a place where we stayed for 14 years until we left Israel in 1956 was the last house on a street in Rechaviah next to a large open space, we called "Hassadeh", the "Field". A graceful expanse of olive trees among rocks and beautiful flowers in the Spring, a large intact Crusader's castle set in between. Our son Joab, born in 1943, grew up there as planted in this field. He later roamed the many caves there in search of archaeological treasures, which he found. He was later joined by little Elon in these searches, both of them accompanied by our faithful Shepherd dog Perry. The characteristic of these years: The attempt to establish one's own identity in an atmosphere of political vacuum. The State of Israel had not been established yet, the rule of the British was waning.

Highlights of that time: Many are of a musical nature. Huberman and the newly founded Philharmonic-Ravel's Bolero, Dvorak's Symphony of the New World - Saturday afternoons an Frau Stern for tea, cake, recorded music and highly intellectual conversation. Recorded music among the book stalls at Salinger's. Walks in the old city. And parties, many parties. Fun was taken very seriously then. Much thought and inventiveness went into their preparation. The excitement of Holiday excursions down to the coast after waiting for hours for a seat on an Egged bus.

Then came the year of 1945, the end of the war - and with it - the end of innocence. The full impact of the knowledge of the horrors of the camps. At the same time the renewed Arab violence in the country, and especially in Jerusalem, where Jew and Arab lived in such close proximity. Shootings and bombings became a daily occurrence. At a time - with the knowledge of the Nazi horrors - when the need for a Jewish State, a haven for our own people, became so tragically apparent, my own confidence in the feasibility of establishing such a haven, started to wane. I alternated between hope and despair. After the liberation of the camps we had a large influx of new immigrants from Europe, legal and so-called illegal. The struggle, which so far had been between the Jews and the Arabs, with the British playing the role of the seemingly impartial onlooker, turned into an open fight between three active participants, the British now openly siding with the Arabs, much of this fight being waged in the streets of our city. Etzel and Lechi came into the open with the bombing of the King David Hotel. Bodies of victims were carried in open pickup trucks through the streets. The terrible car bomb explosion of the apartment building in Ben-Jehudah Street with so many casualties. After that the terrible attack on the Arab village of Dear Jassin near Jerusalem, some of the survivors from the village being triumphantly paraded through the city in open trucks, arousing a feeling of shame and horror in some, a mad exhilaration in others.

1947: The United Nations in Lake Success, the creation of the State of Israel. A new spirit of hope and joy. Dancing and singing in the street of the city, with the fire of terrorist explosions illuminating the night sky. Hope and fear, again, the certain knowledge of fightings and battles to come. Then the war of 1948. My own year in the army. Men fighting and dying, only a short distance from home and family, on the hills, in the streets, among the flowers of the spring in the valleys, battles in the city one had lived in and loved so much.

And then victory-or was it?

I gave up hope, In 1956 we moved to the United States.

America-a new beginning, again. Arriving nearly penniless, full of fears and hopes. After initial struggles: The good life. A whole new world, again. A vast continent, freedom, movement, peace, abundance, travel. This land was good to us. And we found new friends.

Somewhere there is a feeling of guilt: one's own non-involvement and hedonistic pursuits. Maybe-I paid my dues in the previous chapters of my life?

To conclude: As any teenager worth his pimples I, too, searched for the deeper meaning of our existence here. Who put us on this earth? Why and why and why? Let me assure you: I did not find the answers to these questions. But-luckily for us-life can be worth living even without the knowledge of it's deeper meaning. Guided by my own code of moral behavior I led my life, never very far from the Ten Commandments. I did not murder, I did not steal. I tried not to hurt anyone knowingly. I tried to make life for my family as pleasant as possible, providing creature comfort, without becoming enslaved to the pursuit of earning money. I tried to strike a balance between the needs of the stomach and the needs of the spirit. I tried to leave space and time for the absorption of the beautiful in all it's rich variety.

Are there many " I-Should-Have " or " I-Should-Not-Haves " ? Yes, a few-but not too important ones.

And to end this discourse on a really positive note-listen to this: When I was into my third year in High School I was approached by a fellow-German in school. He asked me to join the V.D.A., the Verein fuer das Deutschtum im Ausland, a hidden Nazi organization, you know: to take care of the poor, poor persecuted Germans in the Sudeten, the Baltic, Danzig. I nearly joined. Now, I can positively assure you, I have since shifted my allegiances from the V.D.A. to the U.J.A. .

Thank you for your patience.