

Memories of a young emigrant

Part 2

By Anthony Klein



Tony @ 17

It was the winter of 1951 when, with a severely limited luggage allowance, which excluded any valuables beyond strictly personal possessions and no jewellery, we packed our clothes and with one suitcase each, made our way by the night train to Bucharest and then to Constanta, the Romanian port on the Black Sea. My mother was a nervous wreck, almost trembling all the way because my father, from whom I think I inherit my larrikin streak, had hidden some of her jewellery in the hollowed-out wooden heel of some tattered-looking summer sandals! I have a clear memory of boarding the ship - a small vessel called the "Transylvania" which plied between Constanta, Istanbul and Haifa, taking 3 days. Even more vividly imprinted on my mind is this first occasion on which I ever saw the sea - having lived in a land-locked area all my life up until that time when I was aged 17. The sea was cold, grey and immense. There were very few passengers on board, and we were all sea-sick and had retained practically no nourishment until we anchored in the Bosphorus, just offshore from Istanbul, in brilliant sunshine and a calm sea. A wonderful, exotic sight, with all its minarets and domes, Istanbul was our first taste of freedom after many years of living in a quasi-police-state, even though, being on a Romanian ship we were still in Romanian territory.

A short few days after this brief stop-over we arrived in the port of Haifa to be greeted by several friends and distant relatives who either got there a long time ago or, more recently by some nefarious means. Among them was an old school friend who a couple of years before, had gone on a skiing holiday with his parents, to Austria (when it was also still in the Russian zone). By suitably bribing a guide, the whole family skied down the "wrong" side of the mountain to escape to freedom in Italy. (People-smuggling is definitely not a new trade!). They threw oranges at us from the shore as we were lined up along the railings of the ship. Most of the fruit missed its target and ending up in the drink. What a waste, we

thought, not having seen an orange for years and years! We disembarked, marvelling at the wonderful mild weather, at all the inscriptions in Hebrew, now not just a biblical but a secular language, and the overwhelming realisation that everyone was Jewish - including the policemen!

Israel was intended to be just a short stop-over on our way to Australia, so we went to stay in a hotel in down-town Haifa which was actually situated half-way up Mount Carmel. With the port at sea level and some elegant suburbs right at the top of the mountain, the city itself was scattered along the hillside - somewhat like Naples or San Francisco - a beautifully situated city on a wide, sheltered bay. An embarrassing incident is burned into my memory, as such things are destined to be. The day after our arrival, my father noticed that he had left some minor items on board and I was delegated to go and pick them by taking a local bus down to the ship that was still in port. It was his hefty walking stick - an essential item for all central-European gentlemen - and his very fancy gentleman's umbrella, that had a telescopic sheath making it look like just another walking stick. There they were where he left them, in the luggage rack in the cabin that we had occupied, and I was instructed to give a small gratuity to the steward who helped me retrieve them. Then I caught the bus back to the mid-town hotel, with the two walking sticks in my hand. I was quite mortified when an elderly gentleman stood up to give his seat to the poor crippled boy. It took a bit of explaining in English/German/Hebrew that I was only carrying the sticks and was not actually in need of using them!

We marvelled at the sights, sounds and smells of the sub-tropical city, with its bustling commerce and hordes of people – all Jews! – from all sorts of exotic places, like Yemen, Morocco, Baghdad - whence hundreds of thousands of them were expelled after the formation of Israel and its war of independence in 1948. There were also sizeable numbers of Romanians, Hungarians and others who got there earlier and many, many German, Polish and Russian Holocaust survivors, as well an older, local population of early settlers - born in Israel even before it became an independent state. All very interesting experiences for the eyes of tourists, which we thought we were at the time.

However, there was a bit of a snag, a mere formality, we thought: our Landing Permits for Australia, issued around 1947, had expired. At the earliest opportunity, my father caught a bus to Jerusalem to visit the British Consulate (representing Australia) in order to apply for a renewal or an extension. We proceeded to wait for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn – at a rate even more sluggish than in the Eastern bloc, because they could not be greased by bribery. Several weeks later, it transpired that because of a change of government, the immigration programme initiated in Prime Minister Chifley's time was halted, pending a review. Meanwhile I had a wonderful time in Haifa as an exuberant 17-

year old, speaking all sorts of languages, mostly all at once, with the polyglot population of recent immigrants, mostly refugees from all over Europe. I enjoyed going daily to the local movies to see American and English films which had been banned under the communist regime in Romania, all the while explaining that I was there purely to practice my English! (Having learned proper English from a good teacher back in Europe, I managed to acquire a bit of an American twang from all those movies, but mercifully I got rid of it and reverted to proper English soon after arriving in Australia). I particularly remember the John Wayne movies, with subtitles in Hebrew, surtitles in yiddish and side-titles (yes there were such things – running vertically on both sides!) in Hungarian and French. I also spent a lot of time riding the buses, to the top of Mount Carmel and to all the outlying suburbs. Once I even hitched a ride on a small boat, ending up on the far side of the bay, whence I had a devil of a time getting back into town.

After spending a fruitless few weeks in Haifa, waiting for good news from the British Consulate, it became clear that staying in a hotel for much longer was not a viable proposition, so my parents decided to move to somewhere more affordable. We ended up in a single room in a holiday house in the sea-side resort of Nathanya, part-way down the Mediterranean coast of Israel, in the off-season when rents were very reasonable. My father got a job as a manual labourer in a factory, feeding a machine for grinding up pieces of cork, the granular product ending up in floor tiles. I was at a loose end - it was too cold for the beach at that time - so I got a part-time job as a night-porter and afternoon tea-server at a local hotel, giving my parents some welcome privacy - something that hadn't occurred to me at the time, I must confess.

One of the friends who left Timisoara several years earlier and was well settled in a Kibbutz, suggested that I might like to join him - even if temporarily - since there were many other young people there and lots of work opportunities. So it was that I fetched up at Kibbutz Givat Chaim which is situated at the narrowest part of Israel where it is only about 13 km wide and from where, on a good day one can see the sea (from the vantage point of the top of the water tower) as well as (at night) the lights of the West Bank city of Tulkarm.

I was to share a small bedroom with Fouad, an Egyptian boy of about my age, and was to report with him for work at 6am, in the kitchen - the usual place where newcomers start. I worked at setting and clearing tables, scraping left-overs off dishes and operating the big industrial dishwasher, as well as preparing porridge for breakfast every day in a large industrial-size, steam-heated vat. I hated every minute of it! To this day I suffer a marked aversion to dishwashing and make sure that every kitchen that we occupy is equipped with a dishwasher. I spent most of my free time in the company of other young people - a welcome relief for someone who should have still been at school. I visited my parents in

Nathanya almost every weekend only to hear that, in spite of the strenuous efforts of our Australian relatives, there seemed to be no progress on the immigration front - we seemed to be stranded and in limbo.

After doing 6 weeks of servitude in the kitchen, grumbling all the time, the powers that were in the Kibbutz relented and assigned me to be an apprentice to Mr Yusuf, a tall, trim athletic-looking electrician, originally from Egypt, who spoke mostly Hebrew, with a little English and fluent cursing in Arabic - the latter on the many occasions that called for a response to the innate perversity of inanimate objects. There was a large amount of construction work going on at the time - building bungalows for new arrivals in the kibbutz and its outskirts, and the main activity was house-wiring. The houses were made from cement breeze-blocks and the electrical wires were pulled through conduits, buried in channels chiselled in the cement blocks. So, there was an enormous amount of chiselling to be done - mainly by the apprentice - which was OK most of the time because the blocks were quite soft and easily worked with a hammer and chisel. Some of the time, however, the concrete lintels had to have grooves cut in them and that was much harder. That's where I acquired Mr Yusuf's Arab invective which I can still reproduce fluently today. An implied promise behind all this was that when the channels were ready and the conduits inserted, he would teach me about the wiring itself - how to connect to lamps, switches, power-points and so forth - real intellectual stuff he reckoned. Well, he did indeed show me how, but there wasn't all that much to learn. As part of my childhood scientific activities, simple electric circuits with batteries and torch-globes and bells and buzzers were quite familiar to me - and house wiring was just an extension of those simple notions - with a little more attention to insulation, since higher voltages were involved, but even that was not totally unfamiliar to me since a few of my earlier escapades had taught me about electric shocks, without many more hazards than some of the more adventurous chemistry experiments. Reflecting on what I learned there, (apart from Arabic curses) I can only recollect one thing, namely the principles of connecting two switches to the one light - a common enough installation in most houses.

The way it works is this: The two switches are connected by two wires and the act of switching transfers the contact from one wire to the other. The current from the incoming wire in one switch is thus transferred to one of the two outgoing wires, which reach the second switch. If the second switch is in the same position as the first, its outgoing wire can carry the current to the lamp but if it is in the opposite position then the circuit is interrupted and the lamp switched off. It can be switched on again if either of the two switches has its position changed.

I was immensely proud of myself when I was able to figure out, all by myself, how this problem is generalised to several switches, for example to switch a lamp on and off in a staircase from any one of the floors of a multi-storey building. No, it doesn't need a number of connecting wires equal to the number of floors! Two wires suffice, making the connection between each of the switches down the staircase - let's call them the "left" and the "right" wires. Each of the switches is capable of transferring the current from the left to the right connecting wire, or vice-versa. Thus, if all the switches are in the same position, say to the left, the current goes through all the "left" wires all the way down, switching the light on. If any one of the switches has its position changed the circuit is broken and the light goes out, but any one other switch, on any other floor, can send the current back down the "left" wire and turn the light on again. Whether the light is on or off depends simply on whether an even or an odd number of switches are switched. (Don't worry if this doesn't make sense - it really needs a simple diagram – but it is just an example of what in physics is called a "parity operation" - switching between even and odd, or between left and right).

After six weeks of this, it was summertime and the beaches of Natanya were beckoning. Besides, there didn't seem to be much more to learn from Mr Yusuf and my parents assured me that things were moving along and we will be on our way shortly. So I bid a fond farewell to the Kibbutz - but not before trying my hand at a few odd jobs, such as trench digging - a doddle in the light, sandy soil, fruit picking in the orange and grapefruit orchards (after a short time the grapefruit tasted much better – it had more character than Jaffa oranges). I also did a week's night-watch guard duty when it was Mr Yusuf 's turn to do his stint of this chore, shared by all adults in the kibbutz and he "volunteered" me to be part of his squad. Due to the proximity of the border, there was constant vigilance, especially at night, though it seemed that larceny more than terrorism was to be guarded against. I remember enjoying the quiet solitude and the starry night as well as the mid-shift fried eggs and fried potatoes that were part of the deal. Furthermore, the old .303 rifle that we carried gave the job a special air of excitement.

All this was quickly forgotten once I was back in Nathanya, enjoying the new experience of swimming in the sea - something I had never done before, having been brought up on freshwater swimming in the river or in the public swimming pool. I found new friends on the beach too and I resumed my job as night porter in the hotel - I actually took turns with my father who, somewhat amusingly, "inherited" the job from after I left for the kibbutz - it was far more salubrious employment than the cork factory! Still, it was only for the occasional spell and not enough to keep me in the pocket-money that I needed to continue

my explorations of the American film industry. There was a huge backlog of films that I had missed in the last few years of purely soviet fare, mostly propaganda, and I revelled in going to the outdoor, summer movie, almost every night.

When all this got a bit monotonous, my mother had the bright idea that I should seek a job in the electrical repair shop on the High Street of Nathanya. So, one fine morning I bowled up to and met Mr Reznik – an old Russian immigrant who ran the shop. I told him that I had almost completed my apprenticeship as an electrician in Kibbutz Givat Chaim, that I was competent at house wiring and that I could even repair simple appliances. He hired me on the spot and for several days I was sent out to help his foreman a rude, ugly, cross-eyed Moroccan Jew, whose name I mercifully forgot. He bullied me and gave me the worst jobs to do – such as chiselling channels in hard concrete, rather than soft cement blocks – and laughed at my funny pronunciation of the Arabic curses when I missed the chisel and hit my knuckle with the hammer. After a week or so of this, I begged Mr Reznik to let me work in the shop, to which he agreed. It turned out to be an excellent arrangement once learned to trust me because it allowed him to go out to do trickier on-site repairs and installations. I looked after the shop and skillfully repaired things like toasters and irons – not by replacing parts but, whenever possible, by twisting the ends of the burnt-out elements together – a much more economical procedure. Alas, nowadays the whole object is discarded rather than repaired – a deplorable state of affairs! I also had a fair bit of spare time during which I avidly read all the books that I could find – mainly in English – learning many useful things about electrical things, such as Ohm's law, simple calculations, a little about alternating current circuits and so forth.

I had an avid interest in how things work – a trait which characterised my whole adult life and eventually led me into physics – but with a detour via electrical engineering as will become apparent later. What I remember most clearly is learning a little about electric motors, which fascinated me. Simple motors, running on batteries were simple enough to understand – after all I had played with bicycle dynamos and toy motors when I was a kid. AC motors were an altogether different sort of thing – except for small ones like in drills or vacuum cleaners, which were very similar to the DC motors. Mr Reznik, to his great credit, did his best to explain the basics of AC motors to me – such as the synchronous motors used in large pumps and the induction motors that run most industrial machinery. He even gave me some textbooks to read but which were, at the time a little too advanced for me. Some of this material didn't click until the third year of an electrical engineering course, quite a few years later, but I did learn quite a lot, and quite quickly, during the three or four months that I spent with Mr Reznick, bless him.

After about five or six months in Nathanya, it appeared that things were really moving and my parents decided that it was time to move back to Haifa – this time not to a hotel but to a small furnished apartment on top of Mount Carmel, in an area which was very much of a remote outer area, or satellite village at the time but which has turned into quite a fashionable suburb in more recent times. There we were, once again waiting for the long overdue Landing Permits. It seemed that the Menzies Government finally decided to restart the immigration program and that we simply had to wait our turn. I can't exactly remember what my parents did to keep themselves occupied but as for me I had the drill down pat: I went to the high-street electrical shop, introduced myself as an almost fully qualified electrician, with experience in Nathanya as well as in Kibbutz Givat Chaim, capable of all kinds of repairs and able to look after the shop, all on my own. I even had a reference from Mr Reznik, which was suitably vague about period of employment, because we left on very good terms. He was quite sorry to see me go but I explained, I had to follow my parents who were going to live in Haifa.

The owner of the shop, a young chap who had some training in America where his brother lived, was fluent in (American) English and had been trained in the repair of refrigerators. He hired me on the spot, put me in charge of all electrical repairs and even promised to teach me about refrigerator repair. This he never, in fact did – for two reasons: Refrigerators are (or at least in those days were) remarkably reliable objects, so there was really very little call for repairs. The second reason was more important by far. After a few days of letting me loose in the shop, he kept disappearing for longer and longer times. It became obvious, even to a naïve young boy, that the attractive, blonde young lady who sometimes accompanied him on return to the shop in the afternoons was responsible for his being unavoidably detained a lot of the time. She was, in fact, the bored housewife married to some American consular official and I was the innocent party who made it possible for their torrid relationship to flourish, by giving him the free time to pursue it. I learned to just mind the shop – and my own business. I repaired the usual lamps, toasters and irons, broadened my interests in reading books about radio – the American Amateur Radio League's bible in particular, from which I learned an enormous amount because it was written mainly for amateurs that is at just the right level for me.

I also made the occasional "house call" for electrical repairs. One in particular sticks in my memory: I was called, or rather sent, to a large, luxurious apartment in the hills to review some problem with a time switch. The owner, a pious Hungarian Jew wearing a wide-brimmed black hat and a ritual, fringed waistcoat let me in and opened the doors of a large hall cupboard, behind which was situated a collection of the largest number of time-switches that anyone has ever seen. They all needed resetting and reprogramming- and the main reason

that it was I who was sent to do the job was that I could understand his instructions in Hungarian. It is a fact that for strict orthodox Jews almost any action to do with turning things on or off is deemed to be work – and hence forbidden on a Sabbath. (I believe that they actually remove the light globe from inside refrigerators lest the act of opening the door should constitute “work” by actuating the light switch!). Thus, cooking, turning on lights and so forth are not possible on the Shabbat – unless performed automatically by a machine or at least an automatic mechanism such as a time clock. (The alternative, in the past, was to employ a “Shabbat goy (gentile)” to do the work for you). Hence the large number of time switches, all connected to different circuits, all labelled in Hungarian, but otherwise quite straight-forward to anyone who has studied anything beyond the Bible and the Talmud – sources which are rather deficient in mechanical and electrical lore. I marvelled, as I still do, at the concept that the manual flicking of a switch is deemed to be “work” and thus proscribed on the Shabbat, whereas the action of great wheels of the turbines and alternators that produce the electricity are not - and that the subtle Lord of the Israelites is so naïve as to be fooled by the automatic action of time switches. But I said nothing, fixed the problem by resetting the whole bank of dials, to the owner's complete satisfaction. So much so, that he asked me if I could fix radios as well. This needed some quick thinking on my part because our shop did not, in fact, deal with radios. However, having studied the ARRL Handbook in my spare time, I was ready for a bit of “private enterprise” and said that I could give it a try. Whereupon he pointed me in the direction of a monstrously large mantel radio which, he said, had ceased to function. I lugged it all the way home - which was at least a kilometre away - and much to my mother's consternation plonked it on the kitchen table. As expected, the radio was largely empty space inside, except for the large loudspeaker that justified its size, I suppose, and a chassis equipped with six or seven glass tubes - the thermionic valves that, in those pre-transistor days, was what made electronics work. All these tubes worked by the so-called thermionic emission of electrons from a cathode, indirectly heated by a filament, not unlike the one in a light globe. And, just like incandescent light globes, they burned out from time to time. One could tell if they were burned out because they stopped glowing or, if the glass was opaque, one could feel that they were cold. Indeed, locating the cold valve was easy and a bus-ride to downtown Haifa served to procure a replacement. The old monster then sprang into life and worked again like a charm, filling the house with music and, in the evenings, all the languages of European radio stations. Lugging the radio back to its owner a couple of days later earned me the equivalent of a week's salary. My mother, bless her, thought I was a genius!

All in all, I did a fair job as an electrician - except for one minor debacle caused by my colour-blindness. On one occasion I confused a murky red and a murky green wire and gave my boss the satisfaction of discovering and correcting my mistake with no great harm done, except to my ego. I felt then as I still do, totally competent as an electrician - except that knew only the principles and was totally ignorant of such things as wiring regulations, and other such conventional wisdom, without which one could not pass the relevant exams, of course. Many years later, equipped with a First-Class Honours degree in Electrical Engineering I had the opportunity to study the wiring regulations and get an "A GRADE" Electrician's Licence by simply sitting for the appropriate exam. I refused to do that - not wishing to lose my amateur status. All these years, my re-wiring of houses, installation of extra power points and repairing of a complete range of electrical appliances - in the days when one still repaired them - was all done strictly illegally!