

ENGLAND – A COINCIDENCE

“O, to be in England now that April’s there!” Robert Browning

Marty was twelve years old when José and Josy got ready to leave for a sabbatical in England. Concerned about how this might affect his bar mitzvah preparations, they went to consult Rabbi Botwinik at Suburban Jewish Community Center, their local Havertown synagogue. Upon learning of their situation, he told them, “There is no law in the Jewish religion that your son has to be bar mitzvah on the exact date of his birthday.”

“However,” he added, “he absolutely must continue to study up to the very last minute. There are plenty of synagogues you can join in London.”

But when they explained that it would be Maidstone, not London, where they would be living over an hour away by train, he grew concerned.

“That’s different,” he said. Consulting a directory of Jewish addresses, he came up with the following information.

“You’re going to be in Kent,” he told them, “a place where only one synagogue exists. It services the entire southeast corner of England. It’s the only one between London and Dover. The name is Magnus Memorial on High Street in Rochester – isn’t that the town where Charles Dickens used to write?”

He gave them the exact address and telephone number of the synagogue’s president.

“A Mr. Gabriel Lancaster,” he read from his book. “Call him as soon as you get there. Your son needs to continue his preparation uninterrupted. He can have the bar mitzvah after you get back to America.”

Accordingly, once they were reasonably settled into their cottage in England (a sprawling two-story house with three large bedrooms upstairs, a long and beautiful garden complete with gazebo outside, and several fireplaces, none of which ever gave out sufficient heat), Josy at last found the energy to place the call. She got to speak to Mr. Lancaster’s wife, Pearl.

After introducing herself and explaining their situation, she received a warm and friendly welcome. “Why don’t you come to our house Friday night,” the lady said. “We can get acquainted and then go to services together.”

This was how they first met the Lancaster family. They liked them immediately, and soon they would all become close and lifelong friends. During their entire stay in England, hardly a weekend passed that the two families did not meet in each other’s homes or take outings together.

Gabriel Lancaster, an engineer, specialized in aviation engineering. He had worked on the Vulcan bomber, a plane used during World War II, and he proved to be charming, outgoing, and extremely well versed in other ways as well. In particular, Josy found his acquaintance with and love of British poetry delightful.

Though not overly religious from an orthodox point of view, he headed the synagogue with enthusiasm and commitment. The place turned out to have a membership of only twenty-four families coming from a variety of social, educational, and economic backgrounds. But their small numbers and isolation in a community where few Jews lived fostered a cohesion that kept them closely in touch with one another.

The first night they came to the Lancaster home they met not only the parents but the children as well. Joy, the daughter, was pretty, in her early twenties, already well traveled. Leslie, their younger son of fourteen, was the same age as Lois. Their other boy Ian, seventeen or eighteen, was away at the time in Israel for that year, but they would get to know him later when, after their return to the United States, he would visit them in Havertown.

After a repast of sandwiches and tea that Pearl prepared especially to welcome them, both families left together for the synagogue. Here a rousing welcome awaited them. Their arrival was an event in this small town, the presence of a Jewish American family almost unheard of in such a remote corner of England!

Immediately they were offered full membership, and a Dr. Ralph Taylor among the congregants waxed enthusiastic and made the following announcement from the pulpit.

“The entire congregation,” he stood up at the close of services, “is invited to my home tonight for an oneg shabbat in honor of the American visitors.”

It was a heart-warming moment. Most of the congregation took him up on his offer.

Once at his house in Rochester, they all had a chance to get better acquainted. Dr. Taylor was a general practitioner, his wife, Dr. Nina Taylor, a pediatrician. Everyone mingled in warm and pleasant camaraderie, and before long, José and Ralph Taylor became involved in a discussion that kept nagging at them both.

“You look very familiar to me, Professor Rabinowitz,” Ralph Taylor spoke up. “I’m sure we must have met before. Tell me, when were you last in England?”

“Actually only once in my life, back in 1958,” José answered. “I was on my Fulbright year in Copenhagen, and the American Embassy invited me to come to London to discuss some research. But I never got out of London, and I was there only three days.”

“No, no, that’s not it,” Dr. Taylor answered. “That was my year in Africa. I was out of the country all year. Are you sure it was 1958?”

“Yes, of course,” José replied. “It was during my stay in Denmark. But you look familiar to me, too, Dr. Taylor. I know we’ve met before. When were you last in the United States?”

“I’ve never been there,” Dr. Taylor responded. “It’s always been my lifelong dream to go.”

Puzzled, they stared at each other. The longer they talked, the more each insisted that they had met earlier. This continued this entire evening, until all at once José got an inspiration.

“Tell me, Dr. Taylor, where were you during the war?”

“India,” came the prompt reply.

Suddenly they both remembered.

Twenty-three years earlier, during World War II, stationed in the Burmese jungle, José had come across a sign posted near army headquarters on a basha wall reading, “All Jewish personnel are invited to attend a Passover Seder service at the estate of Lord Ezra in Calcutta”. The time, date, and address were given. Though intended chiefly for British troops in the China-Burma-India Theater of War, the announcement said nothing about being off limits to other nationalities. José saw it as a chance to get away from the jungle for a while and celebrate the Jewish holiday.

He got permission for a short leave, and went to a nearby army airport where he hitchhiked a plane ride to Calcutta. Arriving there late in the afternoon, he hailed a taxi and headed for the estate. They circled the city for what seemed an interminable length of time. The driver, unfamiliar with the address, got lost, and it was more than two hours later before they eventually arrived.

Lord Ezra, it turned out, was India’s foremost silk manufacturer, prominent and extravagantly wealthy, famous for his philanthropy and good works. The estate proved enormous, spreading over numerous acres, luxurious beyond belief. Passing through the magnificent front gardens and into an opulent interior, José finally arrived at an enormous room lined with dozens of extremely long tables. Here some two hundred service men (mostly British) were seated. The Seder was well under way.

A guard led him over to one of the tables. “Here, make room for the American sergeant,” he ordered. Two British officers pulled apart, making space for him. There he sat down, next to a captain who turned out to be none other than the Ralph Taylor he was now speaking to years later in England!

They spent the rest of the Seder in Calcutta together, conversing, exchanging pleasantries and experiences, and by the end of the meal they felt well acquainted.

“When do you have to return to your post?” the captain asked.

“Well, immediately, as soon as this Seder is over,” José replied. “I have to get right back to the airport and hitch a ride to Ledo, Assam, as soon as possible.”

“Tell you what,” remarked the captain. “I’ve got a company car. I’ll drive you to the airport and meanwhile give you a tour of Calcutta on the way.”

This was how José and Ralph Taylor originally met. Now in 1968, in this out-of-the-way corner of England some twenty-three years afterward, they unexpectedly came together again! Through the rest of that stay in England, they formed a closer friendship and their families continued to socialize with each other.

It turned out that Dr. Taylor had a daughter named Susan, the same age as Malva. One day Josy received a phone call from Nina, his wife.

“I’d like to invite your two daughters, Malva and Lois,” she said, “to come to Susan’s Sweet Sixteen birthday party next week. It will be on Friday afternoon, at four o’clock, formal (girls in long evening gowns). We’d be delighted to have both your girls attend.”

After thanking her, Josy replied, “My girls don’t own evening dresses.”

“And besides,” she explained, “I have no way of getting them there. My husband drives the car to work in Sittingbourne, Kent, several miles away, and he has it there all day long. He doesn’t get home till after seven.”

“We can arrange that,” Nina replied. “Since your girls are Americans, they don’t need evening gowns. They can come in their school uniforms.”

“And as far as getting here is concerned, if you put them both on the bus in Maidstone, I’ll pick them up at the depot in Rochester, and we can get them back the same way.”

So it was arranged. Malva and Lois got to attend Susan’s Sweet Sixteen party. Later they gave this account of the event.

“There were ten girls there,” they recounted. “All in long, floor-length dresses. We were the only ones not dressed up. The weather was nice, for a change, no rain or anything, so we all stood outside in the garden sipping tea and eating cucumber sandwiches.”

“And what did you do after that?” Josy wanted to know.

“Oh, we finished our tea,” came the reply, “and then we all played leap-frog!”