Becoming an Anthropologist

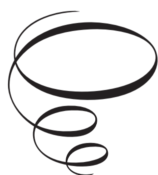
Becoming an Anthropologist:

A Memoir and a Guide to Anthropology

By

Gerald Mars

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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Those who know me, realise how much I owe my wife Valerie. Her constant monitoring, support and criticism are the mainstay of everything I attempt, not just this book.

PREFACE – AND A GUIDE TO THE BOOK

This is a book that I hope will appeal to people who want to know about the social bases of behaviour. It has been written so that readers with no knowledge of social anthropology can take it as it is and read it as narrative. But for those who wish to take it further – the extensive footnotes supply elaborations of the text and a guide to further reading. It should also appeal to those interested in applied anthropology as well as to teachers of the subject.

The book demonstrates that how people's lives are organised, determines not only their behaviour but also their perceptions and values. It is an account too of a rather odd profession, of how its members work, how I became a member of it, and of how I came to understand something of the cultures in which I grew up, worked and did research.

It was in my mid-twenties that I began training as an anthropologist. But it was the 'pre-professional' years that provided the bedrock to becoming one. Giving especial attention to these early years, and with the benefits of professional hindsight, I can now put flesh on the cultures in which I grew up, lived and worked. The accounts speak through the stories and the language of those involved.

Part I of the book therefore, explores in some detail the early years of childhood – of life in a close working-class community in wartime Manchester – with its mix of bombing-raids, rationing and the black market, its residents' disdain for education ('it'll snap your brain') and its cynicism of government and officials that ran counter to wartime assertions about 'all pulling together'. Growing up in Manchester sharply contrasted with what followed – adolescence and work in a seaside holiday resort – the ultra-entrepreneurial, competitive, booming and crime-prone Blackpool of the fifties and sixties. Here, the dominant competitive ideology was to 'make it' – and fiddling and 'knockoff' were routinely accepted and often colluded in by bosses. The names of numerous people have necessarily been changed.

Work in over thirty jobs, taught me the extent and practices of workplace fiddles as practised by both bosses and workers – often in collusion. Work on the Golden Mile and the Pleasure Beach revealed the methods of spielers (barkers), the techniques of mock auctioneers and the secrets of clairvoyants. And as a boarding house child I was well set to

explore the gentility of landladies. Later, I was to experience what it was to work in a Dickensian factory. By now, an early involvement in several cultures was working, by comparison, to sharpen understanding of them all.

Part II explores a yet different culture, the RAF, with two years National Service in the ranks spent surveying its rituals, participating as a scapegoat, observing hierarchic coercion and being involved in forms of lower level resistance. Here, a complete same-age cohort lived together irrespective of class or education. We could hardly ignore comparisons about ourselves and others. It gave many conscripts, including me, wider visions of a different life on demobilisation. 'If he can go to university then I'm bloody sure I can,' was a not uncommon response.

Part III describes various short-term involvements discussing the functions of interviews, the culture of the police, the nature and effects of official target-setting and the irrationality of organisation in a secret Royal Ordnance Factory.

Part IV discusses Cambridge and how 'learning the ropes' meant learning to navigate in a strange land with different rituals and new behavioural nuances. Here women behaved very differently from their counterparts in the North and the exercise of authority was much subtler than any I'd previously met. Cambridge of course offered training: some understanding of research methods, social science theories and a comparative knowledge of other cultures. I could now look back with sharpened understanding at the communities I had left – and forward to those I would research as a professional.

Part V: Becoming an anthropologist involved practical training. It meant spending two postgraduate years in intensive fieldwork drinking with Canadian longshoremen, analysing their mode of joking and exploring the implications of their conflicts. It explored the built-in antagonisms of fathers and sons that affected all aspects of their lives. Appreciating their sophisticated methods of pilferage - allied to a strong but atypical morality – involved teasing out the sociology of their work gangs and the integral role these played in industrial relations. Finally a more light hearted account of expatriate life in the University community shows that fieldwork wasn't all work.

Part VI: Using Anthropology is a miscellany and discusses different jobs and their anthropological analyses at home and abroad. Work, consultancy and fieldwork over fifty years has involved exposure to a wide array of cultures and organisations. Only a selection is given here but they demonstrate the wide range that applied anthropology can cover. There is a case-study of the place of magic in a multinational company,

made explicable by comparison with the magical beliefs of other cultures. A brief spell in Nigeria offers alternative viewpoints about corruption; the imposition of what to us, appear savage punishments, and the means by which nepotism is avoided – or alternatively embraced. What it revealed about the ethnocentricity[1] of expatriates – and of our own 'western' culture was as interesting, and as useful, as much of what I learned about Nigerians and theirs.

Account is given of work in a polytechnic and of the structures that facilitate scapegoat selection. Its student militancy is understood by comparison with union militancy in Newfoundland. A major study set in the Soviet Union researched its black economy – which brought me up against both the CIA and the KGB. Neither is recommended.

Closer to home I examine the culture of the police and of responses to 'control through targeting'. Studying and working in organisations reveals the mechanics of their politicking and of what makes an organisation 'tyrannous' – a condition on the increase but which is under researched and is discussed here with relevance to a university business school. I then describe life in a secret government factory and assess the negative nature of its 'need to know' practices. Chapter 18 discusses a growing social constituency of 'free spirits', whose dominant value and aim is to be autonomous – being free as far as possible of the constraints of social, bureaucratic and financial involvements. These are the 'Autarchs' who are theoretically identified in Chapter 18.

Part VII, Episodes, discusses why we in the West find bereavement more difficult to cope with than do most of the world's peoples – influenced as we are by the dominant role of organisations in our society, a reduction in functions performed by families and their geographical dispersal. Closer to home and somewhat tongue in cheek, I then look at life in bourgeois Hampstead with its incipient hypochondria.

Part VIII gives attention (in Chapter 21) to the theoretical framework that has guided and moulded much of my work. Known as Grid/Group, Cultural Theory or CT, readers are invited to return to the accounts to see its relevance.[2]

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1 'Ethnocentricity' is the assessing of another culture from the standpoint of one's own (as in: 'they have superstition: we have religion'). It is considered the prime anthropologist's sin.

2 This is the core of Mary Douglas' later work and of her followers who describe four (some say five) archetypal situations found in all cultures and which reveal a clustering of values, attitudes and behaviours appropriate to each. See chs 8 and 21 of this volume for a discussion of the fifth solidarity.

Part IX, The Conclusion, *Becoming an Anthropologist* attempts to pull these strands together and to show how the total experiences of a life have been brought to bear in becoming an anthropologist. It discusses the application of anthropology's principal tenets and shows how they mesh with the complex of experiences before, during and following work with people of different cultures. Hopefully, this account might encourage lay observers to examine and learn more about their cultures and their own activities.

PART I:

A SOCIAL HISTORY: TWO CULTURES COMPARED

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Part I of this book describes and compares two very different cultures – the first, a close-knit, traditional, working-class community in wartime Manchester, characterised by hierarchic values, conformity, gossip and shame, where the visits of Sid, the black-market egg salesman, were regular and welcome – while the waves of German bombers though unwelcome, seemed, equally regular.

And then, when I was twelve, and in marked contrast, the family moved fifty miles away to Blackpool – an individualist, competitive and boisterously vulgar seaside resort in the north of England where everyone seemed to be 'on the fiddle'.

My mother's aim was to open a boarding house. It didn't work – the interest on mortgage payments, competition of other boarding house keepers, a father in a dying trade, a sick mother and four children, saw to that. But for me the move involved a massive culture-shock.

At twelve, in a town hungry for labour, I could readily get part-time work in the wide range of jobs that cater to tourists. Later I was able to 'go native' in fairgrounds and in numerous cafés, shops and offices. At fifteen I worked full-time in a pretentious gentlemen's outfitters and then in a horrific Dickensian factory. In the ten years between leaving school and university I had worked in over thirty jobs and spent two years in the RAF. Fiddling was endemic in nearly all of them.

The contrast between living in a culture where people accepted their place to one where 'making it' is integral to their way of life emphasised how understanding cultures by living in them benefits from comparison. I was to learn too how understanding workplace fiddling offered similar insights into the varied worlds of work.

CHAPTER ONE

MANCHESTER BEGINNINGS

From the Ghetto to 'The Avenues'

Not everyone does badly in a slump. My parents were among the lucky ones. Those in work during the great thirties slump benefitted from deflation – a reduction in the price of most goods that were cheaper than they had been for years. Houses were especially cheap, and new estates sprang up throughout Britain. Hard-pressed builders, desperate to unload speculatively built houses, cut their prices to the bone. They competed not just on price, but on incentives – a coal-shed full of free coal, a fully furnished lounge. For those in a job there was cheap and easy credit. In 1935 a Civil Service Clerical Officer could buy a new four-bedroomed semi in Croydon for £350 – a years' salary. Artisans in work, like my dad, were able to afford a smaller semi on a new estate in Manchester for £250 – a years' wages.

With the growth of new estates, Mam, ambitious and forceful, saw her chance. The daughter of a destitute Jewish dentist from a family of ten, she had married the ghetto-born son of immigrants who had no English (none when they arrived and still none when they died fifty years later). [1] Now with me, her first child, she determined to escape from renting in a dark, poky, Victorian terrace and aspired to owning one of the bright new semis. Though she did not realise it, she was in at the beginning of a new movement: home ownership. Up to then nearly everyone – from the upper middle classes down – still rented their houses.

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1 One cannot help suspecting that the present clamour over language qualifications for immigrants has more to do with populist anti-immigration rhetoric than the reasons stated. Most of my grandparents' immigrant generation, who never learned English, produced, if not children, then certainly grandchildren who moved smoothly into the professional classes. Many were to make distinguished contributions to society.

We were reasonably well-off. Dad, a clothing factory's top 'sample presser', regularly earned five pounds a week. His skill was to make the samples displayed to the shops look to be of better quality than they were. He earned extra by placing bets for his bosses on dogs and horses. Street bookmaking was then illegal so 'putting a bet on' wasn't easy and only trusted to someone known as honest and reliable. With these extra earnings it wasn't too difficult to pay a mortgage.

In 1935 my parents put a twenty-five pound deposit on 5 Rowood Avenue, one of three new avenues that with Glover and Caradoc were known as 'The Avenues'. It formed a self-conscious enclave of 'owner-occupiers' in an area of rented Victorian terraces.

Set on the lower slopes of a hill, the estate's forty-five identical semis were airy and spacious. Cleverly marketed as 'sunshine-semis', they had a family room the length of the ground floor with large windows at either end. I had my own bedroom. There was even a spare room – and more luxurious still – a garden – all in sharp contrast to the tiny mean terraces that housed the majority of the northern urban working class.

In those days buying a house was a radical move. Both sides of the family thought the venture not just risky but it confirmed Mam as 'stuck-up' and snobbish. Owning one's own house in an 'Avenue' – a word new to most folk – confirmed it.

The most wondrous difference between old and new was that new estates were connected to the electric grid while the Victorian terraces were lit by spluttering gas mantles that gave a poor yellow light. We marvelled at the benefits of clean electricity. As soon as we were settled, Mam went off to buy an iron, a stove, a kettle, a radio and a vacuum-cleaner – all electric, all 'on the HP'.[2] Many terraces had to wait until after the war before they were connected to the grid.

Residentially we were now part of a minority. Coming from a totally Jewish neighbourhood, we found the new avenues nine tenths Christian. For Dad, mild and reticent, the move was difficult. He had been born and spent his whole life in Cheetham Hill, a Yiddish-speaking ghetto where he learned English only when taught it at school, and where life revolved around the bonds of neighbourhood, the synagogue and Jewish festivals. Even the factory had Yiddish as its *lingua franca*. Naturally he was anxious about moving to The Avenues.

I soon became aware – as a Jew living in a non-Jewish area – that I was straddling two cultures. The perpetual observation of their differences

2 HP: Hire Purchase, which took off in the thirties as commerce attempted to clear its stocks in a slump. Its post-war mass appeal contributed to an emergent and new capitalist phase – consumerism.

was a source of constant interest. I was unaware then that at a very early age I had stumbled on a central tenet of anthropological method – the importance of comparison.

By spending my childhood in 'The Avenues' I was later to appreciate how a small intimate community was kept together. Here children were early incorporated into adult affairs in a way largely alien to the middle classes. As such we picked up social mores and mechanisms at a comparatively early age. Well before I was twelve I saw how people were ranked and prestige allocated. I not only observed but was of course, party to how children were reared and how gender differences developed and were amplified. I came to appreciate the ingenuity and co-operation involved in the search for food that bypassed stringent wartime rationing. And I could not but grasp the unifying experience of the Blitz with its recurrent possibility of sudden and violent death.

Respectability and Gossip

The Avenues soon melded into a community where every family's personal details were known to all. It was a community bonded and controlled by gossip, censure, ridicule and ideas of respectability. And the controls worked: people didn't dump rubbish on the street – the street was seen as communal and any dumping would be noted; litter and graffiti were also absent. There was no vandalism. Every adult was expected to check, even to 'clout'[3] any obviously naughty child. When my friend Harold Higginbotham complained to his Mam that he had been 'clouted' by a neighbour – and she found it was for 'being cheeky' – she clouted him again. All adults automatically had authority over all children.

A family's prestige was primarily based on the husband's job. Jobs were carefully rated – except for clerks who were thought of as outsiders and seen as parasitical. Their jobs were 'not real jobs' and somehow not masculine. A clerk's family, the Rimmingtons, lived next door to us at number 7 but they 'kept their distance' – there was no visiting between houses. Mr Rimmington's job, in a reserved occupation, was one considered vital to the war effort and meant he was excused military service. Reserved occupations, of clerks in particular, were much resented.

The most respected jobs were those of skilled tradesmen and those that offered steady employment. At number 3 lived Mam's great friend Mrs Green, a Christian, whose husband was a railway signalman, a skilled job, vital to the war-effort and justifiably rated as a 'reserved occupation'. The

3 To 'clout': Northern dialect for 'to hit'

Greens were also respected because railways, like the council, were one of the few employers that gave pensions and paid sick leave.

But besides the husband's job, a family was assessed by whether its members were quietly sober, its children well-behaved and cleanly turned out, its front room curtains kept neat, and whether its windows showed ornaments that faced out. And when it snowed, I was often told to clear snow for sick or aged neighbours – with no question of payment.

It was expected that front steps be 'wetted' every few days, then scrubbed with 'step-stones' given by itinerant 'rag and bone men' in exchange for recyclable waste. Our 'rag and bone man' came every fortnight with a horse and cart and the cry 'Rags Bottles and Bones'. But Mam, ever the individualist, did not use step-stones – she did our step with red Cardinal polish.

There was little conspicuous consumption in The Avenues – not just because war meant there was little to buy but because it went against pressures to conformity. Anyone attempting to 'show off' would attract both gossip[4] and ridicule.

It was not until well after the war that competitive consumerism really came into its own. So although this was a new community, its values re-asserted those of the pre-war, conformist, Northern working class – or rather that section of it concerned to be respectable. Men would stop and raise their hats to a passing hearse and at the end of cinema performances everyone stood for the national anthem: it would have been shameful to be seen not doing so. When a doctor or a priest was due to call, women would slave for hours to clean their houses. This was a culture of deference and conformity – but not deference to all authority: governments weren't much respected – neither were bosses – or teachers.

Living across the road was our self-employed local window cleaner, Mr Hughes. At the lower end of the status ratings, the Hughes's had an impressively large collection of gnomes in their front garden but this only aroused suspicion. Once, while queuing in the corner shop, I heard two neighbours, heads and voices lowered, discussing the collection. 'You know where he gets them from, don't you?' [5]

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4 See Dennis *et al* (1956), also Hoggart (1957) who well demonstrate how not conforming to common standards is disruptive to communality which is why conspicuous consumption is not a feature of tightly-knit communities such as those of miners but more appropriate to neighbourhoods of competitive individualists. See Tönnies (1887) for the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* types of social organisation. See footnote 30, page 24.

5 The dialogues reported here are reconstructions that, as I hope and believe, are close to the original.

‘No, where?’

‘On his rounds. Hides them in his bucket. You know he cements them down don’t you? No-one’ll get *them* back!’

I never heard any evidence for this – or of anyone ‘losing’ their gnomes – but the Hughes’s were not considered respectable – and so were vulnerable to accusations.

Mothers with children were excused war-work in the factories. They stayed at home and shared cups of weak rationed tea, borrowed half cups of flour or sugar, took care of each other’s children – and gossiped. [6]

I well remember how gossip-obsessed were these women. Gossip was exchanged in lowered voices and had frequently to do with health and illness: it interested me intensely.

One afternoon the Avenue’s arch gossip Mrs Johnson, a pinched, acetic widow of about sixty called to borrow half a cup of tea from Mam – and then as usual stayed for an extended chat. Mrs Johnson was a specialist at recording and discussing illness – especially women’s illnesses. She always looked around her before she spoke then, in a whisper, hunched over her tea and hardly audible, would deliver her latest gems of gossip, innuendo and medical horrors. Why, I wondered, did women always whisper when discussing medical matters? So I quietly rearranged the toy soldiers in my fort and listened hard. Thanks to her, by the time I was nine, I too was something of a specialist, probably the neighbourhood’s top child expert, on the female body in all its forms of illness and collapse. But this time, Mrs Johnson’s new interest wasn’t medical but psychological. You know what’s happened to the Reeves’ boy, don’t you? Their Tom?’ ‘No. What’s happened?’ enquired Mam.

The Reeves’ lived across the road and I liked Tom, a quiet affable lad of fifteen. Unusually he would talk to us smaller boys and exceptionally was at the Grammar. I listened harder.

Mrs Johnson glanced round, settled herself and lowered her voice still further. ‘Ooh! You haven’t heard? (A long pause). His brain’s snapped! Too much book learning; he always has his head in a book’.

There followed accounts of Tom’s increasingly bizarre behaviour culminating in rudery and outrage that had apparently terrified Mrs Rigg, a next-door neighbour. There were ‘oos’ and ‘you’ll never believe it…’ and

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6 Concern with gossip was initially fired by Gluckman (1963) who saw it as contributing to community cohesion. Paine (1967) saw it more as enhancing individual motivations and aspirations. A synthesis (via symbolic Interactionism) was offered by Havilland (1977) and Heilman (1978). Merry (1984) updated the discussion.

'I always knew it' but despite straining hard, I missed the more lurid details.

Tom's 'brain-snap' could not have been too serious. He soon returned to school but his case was often quoted as an example of the dangers of education. For most Avenue people, education was seen as a threat to mental stability as well as to working-class culture.

Gossiping, largely a female activity[7] – was never 'idle.' Gossip provided the shared knowledge that reinforced common values and it buttressed the maintenance of communal standards. It was gossip that asserted and confirmed feminine identity, and young girls were incorporated as women by their membership in gossip groupings. Gossip was one of the principal means by which The Avenues melded into a community.

Failure in the Dreaded Eleven Plus

Teachers often found difficulty in persuading parents to let bright children take up scholarships. Success in the Eleven Plus decided which children would go to grammar schools and eventually to professional jobs; failure destined them to the senior schools and a proletarian life. Many working class people however, were strongly defensive of their way of life – a position that only began to be eroded after the war. They saw grammar schools as representing the middle-class values they despised. Mrs Dempsey – a typically assertive, Northern mother made her position clear. 'I'm not going to lose our Tom. He's going to no grammar. 'And, despite the appeals of his teacher, like many others, nor did he.[8]

Jews and clerks, in contrast, were keen on 'book-learning'. They did not believe in 'brain-snap' and were distraught if their children failed the Eleven Plus. My failure hit Mam like a death. When the hoped-for success-letter failed to arrive, she was not just upset at this slight on her golden boy and her hopes: she was angry. Dad, more sanguine, always the fatalist, tried to persuade her there were some things in life you had to accept. This only annoyed Mam further: she went into battle.

'I'll show 'em,' she asserted: 'I'm going now.' She buttoned on her coat and set off to storm the Education Offices. When she returned she gave us a full account.

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7 But of course, most of the community's men had been drafted into the armed services.

8 Richard Hoggart (1957) explores how this view reveals the self-confident assertion of working-class culture that has now been absorbed into middle-class aspiration.

'I saw a horrible man. He wouldn't tell me anything – just kept saying, "We can't discuss the examination. That's council policy." I ignored him. Just stood there till he went away. Then a young girl came over, a lovely girl, very helpful. I explained you were near the top of the class and expected to pass. "Wait a minute," she told me, "I'll just have a quick look and see what I can see." When she came back, she said [I] was "close to the top of the failures". She was sure we would hear something very soon.'

The next day the letter came: she had fixed it. I had a place at Chorlton Central School, on the far side of Manchester. Though central schools ranked below grammars they were rated above senior schools. Mam was satisfied.

I have often pondered about that anonymous young woman. From the purest of goodwill she had possibly risked her job to bypass a rigid system.

My time at Chorlton was ghastly. It being wartime, all the staff had been dragooned back from retirement. Mr Moore, the PT master, was the sole male teacher under sixty. And he had only one leg.

At Chorlton I was the school's sole Jew. Most prejudice I faced was relatively mild – jibes and being nobody's friend – but it was constant and depressing. One day however it got out of hand and I was rescued – just in time – from the enthusiastic attention of my classmates. They had put a cord round my neck and were about to hang me from a beam in the school lavatories.

The isolation that comes from prejudice turned me from a social participant to more of a watchful observer. This too was invaluable to an emergent anthropologist. One becomes tuned to notice and be sensitive to nuances in behaviour and speech that might otherwise be missed. Allied to awareness of comparable differences in cultural standpoints, it gives what has been described as 'stereoscopic vision'. This, it has been suggested, is why South African Jewry – who are simultaneously involved with a multiplicity of cultures – different kinds of Black, Brown, Boer, and their own Jewish culture – have contributed a disproportionate number of distinguished anthropologists.[9]

The place at Chorlton meant that later, when we moved to Blackpool, I was able to transfer to a school of equivalent status, still not a grammar school but a 'secondary technical', where I was to benefit from two inspiring teachers.

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9 For example, Max Gluckman, Adam, Hilda, Leo and Jessica Kuper, Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes and Cecil Helman among others. See Kuper (1973).

In The Avenues, surveillance was effective well before CCTV was thought of. With hardly any cars, The Avenues were safe for even small children: we played on the road and were visible from a variety of windows, doors and gardens.[10] We were often chaperoned by officious girls as part of their female apprenticeship. Girls a few years older than us were delegated by our Mam's to shepherd us about. They enjoyed it far too much. Eleven-year-old Betty Higginbotham from Caradoc Avenue, was especially insufferable – she wiped our noses every two minutes, checked our language – and threatened to report us to our Mam's if we weren't obedient to her capricious control.

By the time we reached nine or ten however, boys had joined same-age gangs and were relatively free of controls – though we were vulnerable to other gangs. We roamed nearby bomb-sites and un-built-on parcels of land (called 'crofts') where we played 'capture and pursuit'; cowboys and Indians, Germans and British. We swapped army badges and shell and bomb shrapnel (those with copper from shell bandings being especially valued). We trespassed on the electric railways, put pennies on the rails for trains to squash flat and penetrated 'enemy territories' belonging to other gangs we fervently thought dangerous. We selected suspect 'German spies' and followed these often bemused individuals – sometimes for miles. This often involved travelling long distances on buses – without of course, paying – we went on the upper deck and hid under seats. We were free, fearless and feral – but despite present day fears and paranoia, none of us came to harm – and none of us met a pederast.

When girls reached thirteen or fourteen, after menarche, the gender divide began in earnest. Whenever my Aunty Annie visited with my cousin Vera – eight months older than me – she was increasingly brought into their gossip groups while I, after I reached eleven or so, was excluded and sent out on errands.

The girls gloried in their emerging status; they could not wait to be grown up. On a bus trip with Vera, she insisted on paying the adult fare though she was only thirteen – and it wasn't payable until she was fourteen! What annoyed me was the relish with which she asked the conductor for 'one and a half'.

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10 Oscar Newman (1972) specifies that crime will reduce if a residential area's physical characteristics permit residents to see what is happening in their adjacent public space. He defines this as their 'defensible space'.

Anti-Semitism: the Church to the Rescue

Boys were expected to get into minor fights but Jewish boys were prone to be victims rather than antagonists. At eight, I was often persecuted by two bigger lads, the scruffy McGibbon brothers. Well-known as bullies, they were Catholics from Eckford Street who tended to pick on smaller Jewish boys, especially those from The Avenues. One day, returning from the corner shop in Bunyard Street, I was waylaid. Pinning me to a wall and chanting – ’Dirty Jew, dirty Jew,’ they punched me and bloodied my nose.

Luckily, it happened that among Mam’s closest friends was a respected trio of devout Catholics, the MacNally sisters. Celia and Lucy kept a hairdressing salon on nearby Queen’s Road, and Molly, the eldest and most assertive, was a cobbler and – as she proudly asserted – ’the only woman cobbler in all Manchester’. The sisters had high prestige in the Catholic community: not only were they pious but their brother was a priest.

Molly, steeped in literature and knowing much of Dickens’ works by heart, was a toughie who would tackle anyone. When she heard about the McGibbon brothers, she readily took charge. ‘We’ll stop this, you’ll see. I’ll have a word with Father MacRae (the local priest). He’ll settle them – for sure.’ He did indeed. The next time we met they looked sullen, but said never a word and crossed the street.

Catholic priests possessed considerable authority over their working-class congregants. Their moral authority was buttressed by their welfare role and the access they had to limited funds to alleviate hardship. They would intervene to gain employment for out-of-work parishioners, organise parish-wide collections in cases of domestic disaster and were valued for arbitrating disputes. They would intercede with local authorities – and occasionally with the police in cases of minor delinquency. Priestly interventions could therefore carry considerable weight. It was understood however, that their enthusiastic support might diminish if a parishioner’s family was less than respectably pious. Since families, not individuals, were collectively labelled as respectable or not, the removal of a priest’s support from one family member could prove an effective sanction against the whole family. It wasn’t surprising then that after Father MacRae’s intervention the McGibbons’ bullying stopped – and stopped permanently. I was intrigued when later, as an anthropologist in Newfoundland, I found that there both Catholic and Protestant ministers occupied similar roles.

Contrasts in The Avenues between the social distance of Catholics and their priests and the more egalitarian relationship of Jews to their rabbis

were marked. Rabbis were certainly respected – but that did not prevent them being argued with.[11]

The Brutality of Hebrew School (Cheder)

As well as being pressed to be clever and hard-working at school, Jewish boys from age five or six, had to attend Hebrew classes *(cheder)* seven days a week, for two-hours after school and at weekends.

Jewish folklore abounds with tales of sadistic *malamudin*, the teachers of young children. So it was at Rebbe Balkind's *cheder* in Bignor Street. The *Rebbe* was a learned and kindly man but Mr Finsberg, his assistant, was a stereotypical *malamud:* fierce and unyielding, he rarely smiled. To punish us he wielded a leather machine strap, circular in section, and applied with force to our outstretched hands. One day I misbehaved and was given a swipe that raised an angry weal.

When Mam saw it she was appalled. She marched with me as living evidence of outrageous abuse to Rebbe Balkind's house and hammered at his door. The *Rebitzin*, his shy young wife, nervously opened it. Seeing my angry Mam she hesitantly explained: 'Rebbe Balkind can't see anyone today: he's unwell; he's in bed.'

And retreating, she attempted to close the door. 'He'll see me,' said Mam grimly, forcing her way into the hall and dragging me along in the rear. Given a year to live at fourteen, later warned against getting married and then on having children; she had never given way to her own chronic illness[12] and didn't lightly cater to those of others. The *Rebbetzin*, recognising an irresistible force, went to see her husband – then came to usher us upstairs.

Rebbe Balkind, propped on pillows, was every inch the bearded patriarch. He listened gravely as Mam expounded on the outrage done to her first-born. Then, after I had been pushed forward, he examined the damaged hand with its undeniable evidence of outrage. He paused judicially, nodded, appeared to be struggling with a difficult matter of doctrine then slowly pronounced his judgement.

'Mrs Margolis,[13] believe me, if you had thirty children in your class like your Gerald – then you'd hit them. You really would.'

'Oh no I wouldn't,' Mam flashed. 'I certainly wouldn't.'

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11 Indeed, there is a long tradition of Jews actually arguing with God. My friend David Nelken, a scholar of Jewish history (and other subjects), confirms that God has laughed when admitting that sometimes he loses the arguments.

12 Damaged heart valves from rheumatic fever.

13 See p. 24 for an explanation of when and why the family name was changed.

'Believe me, Mrs Margolis you would. You really would.'

'No! – I wouldn't hit them.'

'You think you wouldn't, Mrs Margolis.'

'You're quite wrong, Rebbe Balkind. I wouldn't hit them. *I'd kill them!*'

She paused – then having the *Rebbe's* full attention, she very quietly delivered her *coup-de-grâce*: 'That's one reason I'm not a teacher.'

The Rebbe Balkind, scholar of the Talmud and master of rabbinic argument had met his match. He had to agree that, 'On this occasion, perhaps a word to Mr Finsberg might be in order; that perhaps, yes, there might indeed have been a punishment here that… maybe had been a little excessive…'

From then on, it was impossible to play one off against the other: Mam and the *Rebbe* were united by mutual respect.

War

I was six when war started and twelve when we left 'The Avenues.' It was during the war that I learned to listen, an invaluable injunction of Mam's being: 'always keep your ears and eyes open' – valuable advice in war-time when resources were scarce – and priceless as an inbuilt habit for a potential anthropologist.

With war came evacuation. In September 1939, city children became 'evacuees' and were sent to the country to save us from air raids – each with a gas mask and a name label. Children from my school were sent to farms around Belmont – not too far from Manchester. But my evacuation lasted only a week – though it was a wonderful week. I was billeted with my best friend Harold Harris in the charge of an elderly, kind but ineffectual farming couple with no children, Mr and Mrs Pierce.

The Pierces' farm was a boyhood paradise. We were introduced to a whole range of new knowledge and experiences – finding that milk for instance, came from cows. And the Pierces who had never had children of their own, with kindness, and completely out of their depth, fed us every day on hoarded tinned fruit – a rare luxury – and, as an added bonus – did not require us to wash. We mucked out the pigs and were taught how to milk the cows. But then my Auntie Dora, who had somehow wrangled a job with a car and petrol, came to see how I was getting on. She found me covered in pig-shit with Harold alongside trying to milk a cow. She needed only to glance at our filthy clothes and happy unwashed faces to be appalled. She stormed at the Pierces' and I was snatched up and brought home. Then she contacted the Harris's who arranged a similar rescue for

Harold. Mam, who had been doubtful about evacuation from the start, pronounced: ‘If we’re going to die, then we’ll all die together.’

This view took hold in The Avenues despite officialdom’s policies, as more evacuated children began to reappear. If any of our houses had been bombed there might have been a change of mind – but government advice was never taken as gospel round our way.

Dad, ‘called up’ to the army early, had soon been invalided out and went back to his factory – now making uniforms. Those in ‘reserved occupations’ though excused military service, doubled as auxiliary – part-time – ARP (Air Raid Precautions) wardens or as ‘Specials’ (Special police constables) with authority to enforce wartime controls. Unsurprisingly, they attracted antagonism.

Mrs Webb, a stout, belligerent woman was antagonistic to anyone who crossed her – but ARP wardens were her pet hate. Much of their time was spent checking unshielded lights in the blackout that just might be visible to enemy aircraft – and Mrs Webb was ‘a slack black-outer’.

One morning, seeing Mam returning from the corner shop, she crossed the road and, with waving arms and vivid grimacing, told how the night before; she had ‘really wiped the floor with that Robinson.’ Mr Robinson, a clerk in a reserved occupation, was an ARP warden. He enjoyed the job enormously, and with his thin body and bony inquisitorial nose would spring into officious action at even a glint of any unauthorised light. But he was no match for Mrs Webb.

> Do you know what he said? He came banging on my bloody door and do you know what he said? He told me to “put that light out!” [the standard air raid warden’s cry]. Then he had the cheek to say “Eh Missis, don’t you know there’s a war on?” [another standard cry]. I gave it to ’im. “Oh yes,” I said, “Oh yes – I do know there’s a bloody war on. I bloody ought to – my man’s in it; not like you! Now bugger off!” And he did!

Mam was full of sympathy and praise: wardens weren’t popular. And though she had never had much time for Mr Robinson – she had a lot in common with Mrs Webb. They were both bulky Northern women and in the North especially, the more bulky they were, the more tough, and aggressive they could be. This was particularly evident during the war when women had sole responsibility for the care of their families.

Public Shaming

Mam was high in the assertion league – particularly if anything appeared to threaten her family’s food supply. She demonstrated this when facing Mrs Reid, the stingy proprietor of a grocer’s shop at the bottom of Eckford

Street. Avenues women tended to meet there to exchange gossip. It often acted as a crowded social centre – especially since people could not shop around but had to be ‘registered’ at a specific grocer’s.

Ronnie Frankenberg, an anthropologist, when doing fieldwork in a Welsh border village, tells how he was sent by his landlady to buy a loaf of bread. When he returned she noted how quick he had been. ‘But it’s only two minutes’ walk away,’ he answered. ‘Huh,’ he was told, ‘it takes me an hour to buy a loaf of bread’.[14] So it was at Reid’s corner shop.

One day, after collecting our rations, Mam found one of our weekly ration of eggs was broken – a big loss as rationing limited us each to one egg a week. Mam went to the shop for a replacement but Mrs Reid wouldn’t deliver. Mam insisted. Not realising her vulnerability, Mrs Reid still foolishly refused. Mam told her that she expected grocers would receive an allowance to cover breakages and she believed Mrs Reid was keeping these back for her own family. Mrs Reid denied this. Apparent deadlock. But every local area had a Food Office – an outpost of the Ministry of Food. Mam immediately went there, put her case, found her hunch was correct and obtained details of the permitting regulation.

Armed with this she waited until the week’s busiest time. When the shop was full she elbowed her way to the front and, confronting Mrs Reid, recounted the deception, quoted the appropriate regulation and publicly demanded recompense. A humiliated Mrs Reid was forced to pass over a replacement egg and, having suitably shamed her before a shop full of customers, Mam then announced she would be changing our registration to Cooper’s,[15] the rival grocers at the corner of Bunyard Street. A number of others, also with accumulated grievances, did so too – even though this meant paying off their ongoing debts that were then a standard feature of the grocer/client relationship among the working class.[16]

Mam’s hunch – that there was likely to be an allowance to cover broken eggs – offered a lesson I later applied when studying workplace fiddles: that once you have a key to a person’s motives and a structure that can satisfy them, then you have a key to their likely, albeit hidden,

14 Frankenberg (1990)

15 Wartime rationing required people being registered to deal at a specific shop.

16 Ongoing debt relationships give credit to families needing regular provisions but whose incomes are erratic (Melville, 1973). Later I found similar arrangements were offered by grocers in Newfoundland to the families of casually-employed longshoremen. (p. 159). They are common too in India and around the Mediterranean. This early introduction to both public shaming and to debt relationships offered valuable insights when I later researched the tight-knit community of Newfoundland’s longshoremen.

behaviours. This approach involves not accepting roles as they appear or are presented. I learned to look for people's hidden agendas, to deduce what was in their interests and to uncover how these interests could be accommodated.

Public shaming – common in many parts of the world[17] – and enhanced as it is by gossip[18] – is found in tight communities wherever social relationships are visible and intimate. Shaming, like gossip, affirms shared moral standards and reflects not only on the individual but on their family. Its effects are more powerful and direct than gossip. This is why there are so often sanctions *within* the family when one of their members breaks a communal norm. The intervention of the priest with the two McGibbon brothers, described earlier, worked because it involved the reputation of the whole family.

The Black Market: 'Keeping Your Ears and Eyes Open'

Car use was strictly controlled and petrol tightly rationed. Dr McBride, our GP, had a car to visit patients on his rounds, and Sid Williams, our neighbourhood black marketeer, had another to service his round – supplying black-market eggs to eager customers – at eight shillings a dozen.[19]

Everyone was always pleased to see Sid, who sported the thin moustache and drape suit of the stereotypical wartime 'spiv'. Dapper, always smiling, Sid was a great flirt and always popular with the women – not surprising given the shortage of men. But his visits were erratic. He would frequently disappear – when the Military Police caught him – and then, failing to keep him, would return a month or two later, smiling as ever. I later realised how Sid must have been part of an organised and extensive black economy circuit, a system oiled by bribery and covering production from the farms, with him doing the distribution via his illegal car that ran on illicit petrol. Of course, the whole circuit had to be based on a willing, participative clientele, one rather different from the government's 'all pulling together, Britain can take it' propaganda line. [20]

Buying food on the black market raised no concerns in The Avenues. 'Mad' Frankie Fraser, one of the notorious Kray gang in London's East End, explained how he had begun his apprenticeship as a wartime

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17 For example, see Campbell (1964, pp. 310-320).
18 Gluckman (1963)
19 Then costing about four hours' work at average prevailing wage rates.
20 Smith (1996)