

Benno Schotz

Fragments and pictures from the book „Bronze in my Blood“

(The memoirs of Benno Schotz)

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We came to Pärnu when I was about two years old. The final part of our journey had to be made by road, for as yet there was no railway linking Pärnu with the rest of the country. I have a faint recollection of being shaken about in some sort of vehicle, but remember nothing of our arrival. I had probably fallen asleep. However, the picture that remains in my mind, and the one I seem to associate with our arrival, is seeing the next morning, through the window of our house, a child's desk on a laden cart, sitting at a rakish angle, ready to topple at the least movement. The cart disappeared the following day.

There was a large plot of grass in front of the house. Ours was a rather humble dwelling, consisting of one large room into which protruded the famous Russian stove, almost dividing it in two. Our front door led into a fairly large entrance hall which gave our home some additional character. There was a separate kitchen and an inside lavatory to accommodate four people at once!

The road from the centre of the town passed by the side of the house, towards the river a couple of hundred yards beyond. There was another house behind ours. We had a common yard between us with a broad open gate fronting the street, and various outhouses. Our neighbours were also Jews, by the name of Lewin (Levine) with children of our own ages.

Many a driver would stop on the grass plot, unhitch the horse, and let it graze. Often the men would lift us up on to a horse's back and give us a ride. They were quite friendly to us tots when they saw us playing there. We and our neighbour's children played harmoniously together, except for the occasional squabble.

My father, Jacob Schotz, was born in Yelock, a village in Lithuania, and was sent to study in the *Yeshiva* of Telsh, a famous Talmudic Seminary that prepared students for the Ministry and the Rabbinate. Our family name derives from the initial letters of the Hebrew phrase *Sholiach Tsibbur*'. This means literally 'messenger of the congregation', and refers to the Cantor of a Synagogue. But although my father was a fine scholar, he did not wish to enter the Ministry, - a family tradition. Nevertheless, he used to tell us with pride, that when the famous poet and teacher Judah Leib Gordon came to the *Yeshiva* to examine the students, he received from him a *knip* — a pinch of the cheek — in appreciation of



his answers. This was considered a great honour, and the memory of it was treasured for a long time.

My father did not want to remain in the 'Pale' - the Ghetto - with its stultifying atmosphere and was therefore apprenticed to a watchmaker, as was his brother Elias, who later emigrated to the United States of America. In their day it was a more skilful craft than today, for a watchmaker had not only to be able to repair all types of clocks and watches, but also to make all the parts, including the smallest toothed wheels and spindles. In later life, although his hands shook badly, he was able to take apart and assemble the smallest lady's watch by holding his wrists against the work bench, steadying his hands.



My mother, Cherna Tischa Abramovitz and her family lived in Hasenput, a small town near Libau, where my maternal grandfather was a Cantor in the Synagogue. My father had gone to work there when he became a journeyman, met my mother, fell in love and married her. Their elder children were born in Hasenput. Then they decided to move to Arensburg. This was a town on the island of Oesel in the Baltic Sea, at the entrance to the Gulf of Riga. It was, perhaps, a strange decision to settle in such a remote and isolated town, but they were young, full of life, love and adventure. There was no other watchmaker on the island, and here was an opportunity for my father to provide a service to the gentry and to the general public who previously had to go to the mainland to have their timepieces

repaired. It was only when my eldest brother, Jeannot, reached school age, that our parents began to think about our general education, and this compelled them to return to the mainland.

My father must have decided that Pärnu was a growing town and could meet the needs of himself and his family. The magnet was the two Gymnasia, High Schools, one for boys and one for girls. My parents were keen to give their children a proper education, and there were not many such schools in Russia. At that time she had only ten universities for a population of nearly two hundred million, while Scotland, with a population of five million, could then boast of four.

We moved several times, each time to a larger house, but it was of our first home in Pärnu that I have my happiest memories. There we children made a vegetable garden, planting cucumbers, carrots, radishes, and potatoes. Carrots grew well in the sandy soil, and it was great pulling one out of the ground, dusting it against one's shirt, and enjoying its delicious freshness and flavour. I grew sunflowers at the back, and used to watch them turning their 'faces' towards the sun. When they were ripe I would cut off their heads and eat the dried seeds. We were all young, and life was full of enchantment, exploration and discovery.

A new Minister had been engaged by our small Jewish community. He had to perform the duties of Rabbi and Cantor in the Synagogue; he had to teach the

children Hebrew and the Jewish religion: he also had to perform the ritual killing of the animals and poultry for our food. This was the most important part of his duties. This was not considered a trade as such, and he was therefore liable to be deported at the whim of the authorities. To make his stay legal he had to be given a trade. My father, who was one of the leaders of the community, thought that it would be a good idea if the Minister adopted the role of a baker. Shelves were erected in our entrance hall, and my mother baked loaves of bread of various kinds which were displayed on them. Should the question of his trade arise, here was proof that our Minister was also a baker!

I was born in Arensburg in 1891, the youngest of seven children. The date in my passport is given as 28th. August, according to the Julian calendar, but I would not swear to its veracity. I had three living brothers and two sisters. Jeannot was the eldest, my second eldest brother, Pesach, died before I was born, then came my sister Elsa, my brothers Kuciel and Moses, or Maxie as we used to call him, and my sister Hesse.



Elsa, Maxie, Hesse and Benno with their dog Mopsi

When my brother Pesach died in infancy, from meningitis, his death was never registered, forgotten perhaps, because at the time my father was away from home, although his birth had been registered. When the time came for his call-up to military service, my father could not produce him. To the authorities this could have meant that he had absconded, and father would have been in great trouble. So with some diplomacy Jeannot was saddled also with his younger brother's name, as at that time he was already a university student and had deferment from the army.

During the summer, visitors would come to our town from all over Russia, some for a month, others for longer periods. They used to rent dachas near the sea, and there were enough and more to accommodate them. There were bathing huts on a jetty which ran a fair distance into the sea where the water was nearly waist deep. There was also bathing from the shore, men and women having separate parts of the beach.

Above the sands, facing the sea, was a glass fronted *Kurhaus* where one could enjoy refreshments and where there were occasional cabaret acts. Now and again I would accompany my sister Elsa to watch the performance, for it was not seemly for a girl to go there by herself

Near our house there was a small park with a clearing in the middle, at one end of which there was a bandstand in the shape of a sea shell, where an orchestra would play several times a week. The violinist-conductor was a good-natured and good-looking, slightly-built man, who would acknowledge with a smile and a bow, the applause. He played extracts from classical music, and Strauss waltzes. We loved to stroll about listening to the music, and our musical education began there.

My father had a shop where he sold watches and clocks as well as repairing them. One of its walls was completely covered with clocks of varying sizes and shapes, their pendulums swinging about 'tick tock, tick tock', but never in unison. I tried to get the pendulums to swing like soldiers on a march, not realising as a child that this was an impossibility, the pendulums being of different lengths and the works of different makes. I spent quite a lot of time in my father's workshop learning how to clean and assemble watches, and how to turn and make fine spindles for wheels. I could, if need be, have earned a livelihood as a watchmaker. I became used to handling tools, and this stood me in good stead when I decided to become a sculptor. My training had only one drawback for having been used to watchmaker's tools, I bought similar ones for my sculpture, to find that they were far too delicate, and I had to buy stronger, heavier and more solid ones for the work I wanted to do.

My father was just above middle height, had sandy hair, with perhaps a touch of ginger, and a neatly trimmed beard. He was well read in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German; he spoke a rich Yiddish, German like a native, and Estonian and Russian well enough to carry on his business and a normal conversation. Between themselves my parents spoke Yiddish. My father knew Biblical Hebrew perfectly — Modern Hebrew had not yet come into being. He knew it so well that he could read us a story in Yiddish, yet when we wanted to read it ourselves, more than once we would discover that the original was in Hebrew. He was an instantaneous translator.

In the evenings, when we were by ourselves, or when the company was congenial, father would read us chapters from Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim, or the other authors who were then becoming great names in Yiddish literature. When father was telling a story he made you see the scene in front of you, and when he was telling something funny his acting would be so astonishing, that we would roll with laughter, tears streaming from our eyes. But many evenings were spent discussing authors and artists. I believe now that it was because of these discussions that my interest in Art grew and flowered.

The Russo-Japanese war was followed by the first Russian Revolution in 1905. It

could not succeed because the Russian army, although no match for the Japanese, was powerful enough to quell with great barbarity, the revolutionaries who were unprepared and insufficiently armed to fight the army. Army units and Cossacks even came to Pärnu, and I heard that quite a few local men were marched to a field near the sea and shot. One day I was walking on the pavement of a narrow and quiet street, when suddenly I saw coming towards me a company of mounted Cossacks. My heart leapt into my mouth, for I was afraid that one of them might playfully swipe me with his *knout*, but they passed by and I sighed with relief

We students had many discussions about the political situation. The Russian intelligentsia were in favour of political reform and gaining some say in the running of the Government. The Jewish intelligentsia sided with them. During the Revolution the Jews mounted the barricades in support of the non-Jews. It was their belief that by helping to free the masses, their own lot would also be improved.

This ideology ran parallel to the growth of Jewish Nationalism which was being fanned to a bright flame through the emergence of Hebrew and Yiddish literature and a Jewish Press. It took a long time for the French Revolution to trickle through to the Jewish Ghettos, and the hope of returning to Palestine was taking root and gaining strength. The pogroms helped to give it direction. History has always affirmed that when the time was ripe for a certain movement, a man would surely appear to lead it. In this case that man was Herzl. In our town my father became the leader of Zionism, the word derived from 'Zion', the name of a hill on which Jerusalem is built. Our home became the gathering place for discussions and talks about Zionism, and I listened with open ears and tried to absorb all I heard. I remember the afternoon when father came home weeping with the news that Herzl had died. Something also died in him that day, but his striving and urge did not diminish. It was sustained by a slow and determined will and a spiritual fire that once kindled can never be extinguished. He was beginning to look old, and the strain of providing for his family was also having its effect. Had he not suffered from heart trouble I am sure he would have wished to emigrate to Palestine.

Although our secular education began when we were nine, it was different with our Hebrew and religious education. A child began to learn the Hebrew alphabet at five. Well do I remember the day when I mastered it, and the teacher who used to come to our home called my father in to hear me repeat the letters of the alphabet one by one. Suddenly a coin fell on the book from which I was reading. Surprised, I looked up and asked father where it came from. "From Heaven." he replied. I have heard many stories about Heaven, but I had never heard that it dropped money!

But how could I doubt father's word? He would never tell me a lie: so I looked up to the ceiling, and true enough, there was a crack in it right above me, and the coin *must* have fallen through it. This was my first experience of miracles, and I have good reason to believe in them to this day. In my long life I have witnessed many singular happenings, both to myself and to my people.

I spoke to my parents in German. In Liefland, the name of our region at that time, German was spoken extensively, as many Germans, mostly of noble lineage, had settled there centuries before, living in Pärnu and its environs. To speak German was a sign of a cultured person, of gentility. The signs over the shops were usually in three languages; Russian on the top, since it had become the official language; then below, the sign was in German; and only below the German was the inscription in

Estonian, the native language of the country. Even the town was renamed Pernov to sound Russian. Hence the three names of our town, Pernov. Pernau, Pärnu.

When I was nine years old, I realised the incongruity of I, a Jew, speaking to my parents in German! I was suddenly struck by the falseness of the situation. After that I began to speak to them in Yiddish. Strange to say, my parents took it quite naturally and never remarked on the change. They probably accepted it as right and proper. Perhaps they felt that I was beginning to grow up to be a Jew. Of course, it may have had to do with the birth of Zionism that fired us with a new found idealism. I began to read our Yiddish poets and literature that had then started to flourish.

When a circus used to visit the town, and it did so every year, we children used to play at circuses. When a fire occurred in the town we played at being firemen. We devised all kinds of games to keep us busy. When I entered the *Gymnasium* all this ended at a stroke. Classes were from eight a.m. till two in the afternoon, and we had to study hard at home. We also made new friends and developed different interests. We grew away from our former playmates, most of whom were not sent to the *Gymnasium* as we were.

A uniform was compulsory — a black jacket with an upstanding military collar, a broad leather belt, and black trousers. Some sported a white frill which projected a quarter of an inch from the collar and cuffs. The overcoat was of military grey, and at night soldiers would mistake us for officers and salute us when passing on the opposite side of the street, and we would salute back, not to confuse them.

With the Revolution of 1905-7 began the revival of Estonian nationalism and a revival of the Estonian language. I had only a smattering of it, sufficient to talk to our maid, but I began to hear it spoken more openly at school among the Estonian students, and they even started to write poetry in it.

The Germans always behaved as if they were in a class above the rest of the population. The German students always kept themselves apart from the rest, as if they were noblemen — and some were. We, the Jewish students did not count at all. There were only a few in each class, and we fell between the two factions, the Estonians and the Germans.



When I finished at the *Gymnasium* in 1911, I failed to obtain a silver medal, since I was only given a pass in German in my examination, although it was almost my mother tongue. At the time it seemed a terrible blow, for the whole direction of my life changed. It was therefore obvious that I would have difficulty in obtaining a place in a Russian University. Also, I had not decided what profession to follow. Sculpture, as a profession, had not entered my mind.

As a stop gap I applied to the Mathematical Faculty at Dorpat, later called Tartu. I was fond of mathematics, and thought that as not many Jewish students went in for it, I might have a chance of a place there. I did not realise that as far as the Government was concerned, the faculty did not matter, just the

total number of Jewish students.

However, because students entering a university were given seven years deferment from military service, it was destined that I should go abroad to study. Russia was not blind to what was happening in Europe, and could see signs that a war was soon inevitable. She therefore decided to curtail the deferment of students by a year, for she needed to train officers for the army. This meant that many students had to abandon their university studies and join the forces, which lowered the total number of Jewish students who could be admitted. I was number twenty seven, but only twenty five were admitted! This made my going abroad imperative, and so my odyssey began.

Most of the Jewish students, who could not get into a Russian University, went to study in Germany, usually to Heidelberg, for Law or Medicine. Very few went in for Engineering, the faculty I finally decided upon. My idea was to go to Zurich to study. Switzerland was famous as a centre for manufacturing watches, and having been trained in a watchmaker's workshop I imagined that I might be able to get part time work to augment my allowance from home. On the journey abroad I met a former student from Pärnu *Gymnasium*, Moses Seidelberg, who hailed from Riga, and who was well known to our family. He had been studying in Heidelberg for some years, and was very much aware of what was happening in Europe. When I explained to him my reason for going to Zurich, he disillusioned me and told me that I would have no chance of finding the work I was anticipating. He advised me to go to Darmstadt in Germany where there was an important Technical College 'Die Grossherzogliche Technische Hochschule', famous for its Engineering Department. I therefore took his advice and changed my plans. I had to do so without consulting my family, as I felt it unwise, because of the expense, to stay in Berlin till I could communicate with home and receive their approval. So I found myself in Darmstadt and not in Zurich. I don't remember what reaction my first letter home created, for they certainly did not expect to receive one from Darmstadt. This was my first exercise in making quick decisions for myself, and it gave me a feeling of independence and courage, and I had many occasions to use it afterwards without regret. I arrived in Darmstadt in October — I still have my matriculation card dated 27th October 1911, and I found lodgings with an old lady and her daughter who turned out to be Jewish. I discovered this when I lit candles for *Chanukah* — our Festival of Lights — and when they saw it, they revealed themselves. I realised then that anti-semitism was rife in Germany. When the front door on the landing was open — they lived in a flat one stair up with another facing — they spoke in whispers when referring to Jewish matters, in case the Germans living opposite might hear.

My sister Elsa married her childhood sweetheart, Nanu Lewin (the son of our first neighbours in Pärnu) during my stay in Darmstadt. I could not afford the time away from my studies, nor the cash to return home for the wedding, but wrote her a poem in German, which was read out at the celebration, and was received with great delight by all the family.

When Jeannot matriculated from the Gymnasium with the Gold Medal, he was undecided on a profession. A German student with whom he was friendly was keen on Chemistry, and suggested that he should take it up also, hoping that by studying together he would benefit from my brother's brilliance, and this took him to Riga University. One day in 1907, we heard by the grapevine that the police were looking for him and that he was in hiding. His crime? His name had been found in the pocket book of a student who had been arrested. This was still the aftermath of the 1905-7 Revolution, when the Government were conducting mopping up operations, and had he been found, it might have meant transportation to Siberia, or a long term of imprisonment.

So father got busy and arranged for him to be smuggled over the border into Germany. From Hamburg he sailed to Leith, in Scotland, and from there went to Glasgow, where we had quite a few relatives who had emigrated there some years earlier.

My parents had not seen Jeannot for four years, and feared they might never see him again, for at the time it was out of the question for them to travel to Glasgow. It was therefore decided that the next best thing was for me to visit him during my spring vacation, and later, when I returned home for the summer, to bring back news. My brother, trying to make it easier for me to enter Britain, wrote a letter in which he stated that when I came to Glasgow I would enter the Technical College there to continue my studies in Engineering, but I assumed that this was really his wish, although I had arranged things with my parents differently. This letter he intended to be shown to the Immigration authorities should difficulties arise, although in those days an immigrant only needed to have on him five pounds to be admitted to the country.