
Opening Extract from...

When I Lived in Modern Times

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For the portrait of the early years of the kibbutz, I drew on a vivid series of articles by Assaf Inbari published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha-Aretz*, on the establishment of Kibbutz Afikim.

Very late in the day in terms of the writing of this novel, Joachim Schlor's *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City* (Reaktion Books, 1999) was published. If you want to know more about the history of the city, this is the book.

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They are a people, and they lack the props of a people. They are a disembodied ghost . . . We ask today: 'What are the Poles? What are the French? What are the Swiss? When that is asked, everyone points to a country, to certain institutions, to parliamentary institutions, and the man in the street will know exactly what it is. He has a passport. If you ask what a Jew is – well, he is a man who has to offer a long explanation for his existence, and any person who has to offer an explanation as to what he is, is always suspect . . .

Evidence from Chaim Weizmann to the
United Nations Special Committee on Palestine,
8 July 1947

When I look back I see myself at twenty. I was at an age when anything seemed possible, at the beginning of times when anything *was* possible. I was standing on the deck dreaming; across the Mediterranean we sailed, from one end to the other, past Crete and Cyprus to where the East begins. *Mare nostrum*. Our sea. But I was not in search of antiquity. I was looking for a place without artifice or sentiment, where life was stripped back to its basics, where things were fundamental and serious and above all modern.

This is my story. Scratch a Jew and you've got a story. If you don't like elaborate picaresques full of unlikely events and tortuous explanations, steer clear of the Jews. If you want things to be straightforward, find someone else to listen to. You might even get to say something yourself. How do we begin a sentence?

'Listen . . .'

A sailor pointed out to me a little ship on the horizon, one whose role as a ship was supposed to be finished, which had reached the end of its life but had fallen into the hands of those who wanted it to sail one last time. 'Do you know what that is?' he asked me.

I knew but I didn't tell him.

'It isn't going to land,' he said. 'The authorities will catch them.'

'Are you in sympathy with those people?'

'Yes, I'm sympathetic. Who wouldn't be? But they can't go where they want to go. It's just not on. They'll have to find somewhere else.'

'Where?'

'No idea. That's not our problem, is it?'

'So you don't think the Zionist state is inevitable?'

'Oh, they'll manage somewhere or other. They always have done in the past.'

This time it's different, I thought, but I kept my mouth shut. Like the people on the horizon, I was determined that I was going home, though in my case it was not out of necessity but conviction.

Then I saw it, the coast of Palestine. The harbour of Haifa assumed its shape, the cypress and olive and pine-clad slopes of Mount Carmel ascended from the port. I didn't know then that they were cypresses and olives and pines. I didn't recognise a single thing. I had no idea at all what I was looking at. I had come from a city where a few unnamed trees grew out of asphalt pavements, ignored, unseen. I could identify dandelions and daisies and florists' roses but that was all, that was the extent of my excursions into the kingdom of the natural world. And what kind of English girl doesn't look at a tree and know what type it is, by its bark or its leaves? How could I be English, despite what was written on my papers?

On deck, beside me, some passengers were crossing themselves and murmuring, 'The Holy Land', and I copied them but we were each of us seeing something entirely different.

I know that people regarded me in those days as many things: a bare-faced liar; an enigma; or a kind of Displaced Person like the ones in the camps. But what I felt like was a chrysalis, neither bug nor butterfly, something in between, closed, secretive, and inside some great transformation under way as the world itself – in that strangest of eras just after the war was over – was metamorphosing

into something else, which was neither the war nor a return to what had gone before.

It was April 1946. The Mediterranean was packed with traffic. Victory hung like a veil in the air, disguising where we might be headed next. Fifty years later it's so easy, with hindsight, to understand what was happening but you were *part* of it then. History was no theme park. It was what you lived. You were affected, whether you liked it or not.

We didn't know that a bitter winter was coming, the coldest in living memory in the closing months of 1946 and the new year of 1947. America would be frozen. Northern Europe would freeze. You could watch on the Pathé newsreel women scavenging for coal in the streets of the East End of London. I had already seen in the pages of *Life* magazine what was left of Berlin – a combination of grandeur and devastation, fragments of what looked like an old, dead civilisation, the wreckage that was left in the degradation of defeat. I had seen people selling crumbs of what had once been part of a civilised life. A starving woman held out a single red, high-heeled shoe. A man tried to exchange a small bell for a piece of bread. A boy offered a soldier of the Red Army his sister's doll.

All across the northern hemisphere would be the same bitter winter. The cold that killed them in Germany would kill us everywhere. But winter was months away and I was on deck in balmy spring weather, holding the green-painted rail of the ship, watching the coast of Palestine assemble itself out of the fragrant morning air and assume a definite shape and dimension.

In the Book of Lamentations I had once read these words: *Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens. Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine. The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feast: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness.*

But all that was about to change. We were going to force an alteration in our own future. We were going to drive the strangers out,

bury the blackened dead, destroy the immigration posts and forget our bitterness. There would be no more books of lamenting. Nothing like that was going to happen to us again. We had *guns* now, and underground armies, guerrilla fighters, hand grenades, nail bombs, a comprehensive knowledge of dynamite and TNT. We had spies in the enemies' ranks and we knew what to do with collaborators.

I was a daughter of the new Zion and I felt the ship shudder as the gangplank crashed on to the dock. I put on my hat and white cotton gloves and, preparing my face, waited to go ashore at the beginning of the decline and fall of the British Empire.

Who *was* Evelyn? Who took a train through France and boarded a ship at Marseilles?

Just a work-in-progress, not even that; a preliminary sketch for a person. I was only twenty and what does twenty know?

Listen, to start with I never met my father, so fifty per cent of me was blank. My mother said he was an American, from San Francisco. She had a picture of the two of them standing in Trafalgar Square in 1923, taken by a street photographer. I can't see his face properly because the brim of his hat casts a shadow. His name was Arthur Bergson and he returned to America promising that he would be back four months later, to marry her. She never saw him again and I suppose he never knew that he had a daughter somewhere in the world.

She grew up in Whitechapel in the East End of London. Her parents came from Latvia on the Baltic coast and they spoke no English. She was the youngest of seven, a wild, disobedient girl, the only one of all her brothers and sisters to be born in England.

I used to sit on her knee at bedtime while she reminisced about her own childhood, her brown eyes seeing things I had never seen, which did not seem right when we had nothing but each other and

for each other we were everything. 'You know, we lived in a big dirty house,' she told me, 'or at least it seemed big to me, and we all slept in feather beds and my mother and father would sit up all night playing cards, talking together in Yiddish about the old country and the town they had come from and a man who had done a crooked deal over the sale of a cow or a *cheder* teacher who had beaten my father or the wind blowing through their wooden houses.

'We kept a barrel with herrings in it at the end of the yard, Evelyn, and there were chickens in a little wooden pen and my mother would go out in her slippers on Friday mornings and with her big red hands she would take one of the hens and wring its neck and I would be in the house with my hands over my ears because I couldn't bear to hear the other hens squawking. My brother Hymie would laugh at me and run around the room imitating a hen – he was a horrible boy Hymie, spiteful, but he came home from the war with a wound in his head that wouldn't heal and then he died of the flu, my sister Gittel, too. She was sixteen and lying in bed and on the fifth day her lungs were full of blood. My mother would come in from the hens and with a cleaver she would cut the bird's head off and the kitchen smelled of dark blood. It was horrible, Evelyn, horrible. Everything was horrible to me. Everything.

'The lavatory was at the end of the yard too and in the winter the water in the pan froze. We used the Yiddish papers, cut in pieces, to wipe ourselves with, and when I sat there in the dark listening to the hens scratching I used to dream of another life, a pretty life where things smelled nice and there was no unpleasantness.'

I sat on her lap with my hair curled in twists of paper and she undid one to see if there was a proper corkscrew yet.

'They called the pennies and shillings and sixpences kopecks and this made me angry. They were here in London but they behaved as if they had never left Latvia. They used to curse the tsar and they danced in the yard when they heard he had been murdered – and all his children with him.

'When I was fourteen they sent me to Cable Street to get a job in a factory that made ribbon but I didn't want to go. I walked down our street and when I got to the end I took a tram all the way to the West End and went to a picture house and saw a film with Mary Pickford and from that time on I tried to make myself look like her and wanted the other girls to call me Mary. Mary! My God, was ever there such a name for a Jewish girl?

'Well, my father thrashed me when I got home and he made me go back to the ribbon factory the next day but he couldn't stop me going to the picture houses. I met your father on the Edgware Road one day, when I was seventeen, and when I heard his American accent, of course I agreed at once to go with him for a cup of tea, especially when I found out that he was from California, the home of the film stars. You know I thought then that England was a half-way house, only part of the way towards the New World, and with Arthur I was going to finish the journey that my mother and father had started but not completed because of my father's stupidity, because he did not understand the writing on the ticket, and brought us passage here instead of to America.'

This was the story of my mother and of the life she had spent without me. I heard these tales until they were almost worn through and transparent. Then she would rush forward to my birth in a home for wayward women of the Jewish faith. They don't like to talk about the fact that such institutions existed, but they did, supplying the contents of the cots at the Norwood orphanage. She said it had a number of wealthy benefactors, some of whom took a keen personal interest in the future welfare of the girls that passed through, and my mother came to the attention of one of them, who set her up in a hairdresser's shop on Regent Street around the time that bobbed hair and the Marcel wave were all the rage. His name was Joe Hertz. Uncle Joe, to me. In the register her name was Miriam Chernovsky but she put the past behind her and became

Marguerite. The surname she chose for both of us was Sert, because, she said, it was brief and it did not seem to come from anywhere.

'Tell me about my father,' I would beg her. But all she would say was this: 'Oh, he was a good-looking man. He wore his hat with the brim down, shading his face, and he smoked cork-tipped cigarettes.' And that was all. I had a Jewish father with the shortest story in the world.

But I had Uncle Joe and what a story *he* had! He came as a young man from Warsaw and his family took winter cures at Austrian spa towns and his own father had travelled across the continent in his business, which was jewellery. Uncle Joe could still taste in his mouth the chocolate that his father brought back from Paris and the cheeses wrapped in gauze which returned with him from Antwerp. He remembered him talking of the years at the century's end when he would journey through Russia to deliver sapphires to Riga. Of the endless forest and its parched, fragrant stillness, the crunch of dry snow beneath the wheels of his carriage, of coming upon a town – a small metropolis of Jewish loggers and sawmill workers, crude men in long beards, their *tzitzes* hanging from beneath their waistcoats, shirt sleeves rolled up as they manhandled birch planks, shouting and cursing in Yiddish to each other, their words freezing in the icy air, then dissolving into white clouds of vapour. Where were they now? Followed their language, become mist.

So I found out early that England was not the whole world. I learned that I belonged in part to another country, another continent even, where things were done differently and that what I thought was real was not inevitable or incapable of changing into something else, as the Russia of the tsar's time was not the same Russia as now.

My mother dedicated her life to being a mistress and learned the arts of a minor courtesan: how to dress and paint her face and

which perfume to use. I would watch her in the mornings sitting in front of the mirror in her curlers, cold-creaming her face, or plucking her eyebrows with sharp tweezers into two surprised black parentheses, powdering the bald place above her lids where the hair had been. She knew the erotic attractions of her body and how to attract her man with it. She cultivated an exquisite femininity, understanding exactly how to entice with hats and fragments of veil and a painted-on beauty spot. She understood the mysterious power of allure and I was fascinated and appalled by the secret arts she practised.

My mother and I shared all our secrets. We were inseparable. We went to the pictures and out to the ABC for tea and toasted teacakes. Once a year we took the train to Brighton and stayed for a week in a small hotel, enjoying the musical shows at the end of the pier. We both loved Max Miller. 'Very smutty,' my mother said. 'But you can't help laughing.'

Uncle Joe ran a number of concerns including a cigar shop on Jermyn Street and kept a *real* wife in a house in Hampstead Garden Suburb. We were family number two and we lived in a flat on three floors, each with two little rooms on it, above a grocer's in Soho. I spent my childhood and youth with the Italians and the Belgians and the man who sold knives and chefs' hats. They felt sorry for us at Christmas and bought us yeasted cakes like domes, made with butter and scented with lemon, or tarts of flushed, scarlet strawberries on a mound of custard, or marzipan sweetmeats in the shape of fruits.

Was he like a father to me, Uncle Joe? Well, we sized one another up and he saw me as the child he had to keep in with if he wanted the mother, and I saw him as someone to manipulate for my own ends, for God knows my mother was incapable of manipulating anyone. I always knew that we were the second string, that there were other daughters, four, as it happened, pampered and spoilt and showered with even more luxuries, which they took for granted

and which I *calculated* to receive. They were the family he showed off, the public family, the ones whom he went to the synagogue with, the ones whom his business associates met. And when he died *they* were the ones whose hands people would shake at the funeral and say what was said on such occasions. 'Long life.'

We were the shadow family, we didn't quite exist. Sometimes, walking along the street, I felt that I couldn't be seen, that you could pass your hand through me. And I wanted to be seen. Inside I was shouting, look at me, pay *me* some attention.

But I have to concede that Joe was loyal to my mother. They whispered together in Yiddish, their private language. I suppose he loved her. If she asked for something (and she didn't ask very often) he always gave in, got his chequebook out. He paid the fees for a private school where I got an education that prepared me for a future far above the station in life I might otherwise have expected. He did it because he was a Jew and believed in the best, the best that money could buy. He was convinced that learning was never wasted, once you had it. It was something no-one could take from you.

'A great man once said' – Uncle Joe was a devout admirer of great men – 'if you learn a poem by heart and they put you in prison, still you've got the poem.' I was set to work to learn to recite by rote chunks of Wordsworth and Tennyson and Browning. Always the narrative works. 'What is a poem,' asked Uncle Joe, 'that cannot also tell a story?'

So yes, he was a good man, a *mensch*, but that didn't stop me worrying that my mother was not getting any younger, despite her dexterity with cosmetics, and – old before my time, with a precocious, courtesan's wisdom that I shouldn't have had – I thought that sooner or later his sexual and financial favours might be withdrawn and we would be stranded, back where we started, with nothing.

Meanwhile, I was looking around to figure out who exactly I was.

In the end, all I had to know myself by was a fragment of something and I was trying to find out what was the main whole it had broken off from.

It turned out that the fragment was part of a story, I was part of a grand narrative that had started before I was ever born. Who was I? I was a Jew. How did I know? Because of the tales they told me, of Poland and Latvia, and also the times we lived in when anti-Semitism was a wolf roaming the world.

And because we lived in Soho.

Maybe in some other place my mother and I would have been forced to dissolve our identities. Maybe we would have tried not to attract unwanted attention, an unmarried mother and her child, but in Soho it didn't matter. No-one asked questions. Within those few streets off Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road it was acceptable to be different, it was *normal*. We were all ethnics, from somewhere else. Everyone had their own churches and social clubs, little colonies in which we preserved the customs of the place we had come from, as my mother and I had the synagogue on Dean Street we attended three times a year, for the most important high days and holidays. We bent our heads over our prayer books among a congregation of market traders and shopkeepers, actors and theatrical impresarios.

I grew up in a world of night streets, of stage-door johnnies ardent or wan with hopelessness holding bunches of flowers; of little ballet dancers from Sadler's Wells like brown wrens when out of their costumes and in their gabardine macs, warming their thin hands over cups of tea; of wrecked men from the first war blowing into harmonicas along the Strand; of the amber and scarlet flame of the braziers that roasted chestnuts on street corners; of the lit-up windows of Fortnum and Mason – once with a fairy coach pulled by silver-painted plaster horses and Cinderella inside it; of the electric advertisements at Piccadilly Circus and bronze Eros with his bow and arrow.

This was my home, but I always knew I was a Jewish child growing up in a Christian country. That I woke up, every Sunday morning, to the sound of church bells ringing across the whole of Christian England and when I heard them I was not summoned to God. After the bells, silence. The shops shut, the traders on Berwick Street market not loading their stalls or sweeping up cabbage leaves, the theatres dark, the pubs closed. If you got on a bus and went to the suburbs there was nothing but the monotonous smell of roast dinners squeezing out through the cracks under the closed front doors. On Sundays life halted. England became a morgue. Outside there were a few walking corpses on the streets. I never understood why England did this, stopping the very flow of blood in its veins on Sundays and allowing it to flow again on Monday mornings. To rest? Why rest? You rested at night, in your bed!

I was a Jewish child in a country where, unlike America, there was no contribution I could make to the forging of the national identity. It was fixed already, centuries ago.

I was eight years old, and already I was an exotic. The English fed their dogs better food than they ate themselves. They fascinated me. *They* were exotic.

I was a round-faced, stubborn, dark-haired girl whose lips were too red and whose eyes were too black. I would grow up into a watchful young woman who stared at herself in the mirror and thought her neck was a fraction too short and whose hair had to be bullied into curls with strong chemicals. I was naturally argumentative but my mother warned me early on that this was not considered an attractive quality in the female sex and so I learned, from her, to curb my tongue and to do what I could to cultivate prettiness and a feminine style.

Joe always said, when customers balked at paying top prices for his finest cigars: 'Sir, there's only one thing worse than having nothing, and that's looking as if you've got nothing. Sit down at a table in a restaurant and light up one of these cigars and you can order a

glass of water and they'll think it's a rich man's fancy. Light up a Woodbine and you'll be out on your ear.'

Show them you're on top of the world, even if you're not. What do you have to lose?

'Buy cheap pay dear' was another of Joe's maxims. And, 'Only the rich can afford cheap shoes.'

And all these lessons were something else that made me a Jew.

I don't know what he bought his other daughters, but from the time I could read Uncle Joe would arrive at the flat with brown paper parcels of books: the novels of Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope which, unwrapped and read, stood in a row between matching china bookends in the shape of horses with white faces and brown manes, until the line grew too long for the dressing table and a three-shelf bookcase was delivered from Selfridges. When I was thirteen, he presented me with a volume containing reproductions of various old masters like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, which drove me to the National Gallery to see the originals for myself. In its chilly rooms on quiet Sunday afternoons surrounded by the unfamiliar landscapes of Tuscany and Florence I came across a crowd of recognisable faces – kings and dukes and popes and cardinals and young men with large brown eyes and pale-faced madonnas with their lusty muscular babies, all looking very much like my Soho neighbours. For the boy who served behind the counter at Lina's must have been a descendant of the Medici and the priest bending over the infant Jesus was the exact spit of my friend Gabriella's surly, black-browed father who laid mosaic floors in the houses of the wealthy, the trade he had brought

from Italy and which his father and grandfather had carried out before him in the churches of the Veneto.

So in the National Gallery I felt more at home than in England and I decided to become an artist and asked for a sketchbook and received one, along with a flat tin box of Caran d'Ache pencils and began to render what I saw of life in coloured crayon.

'You killed our Lord,' a teacher hissed in my ear, grabbing my wrist as twenty of us thundered out of class and down the stairs towards our break. It was not the kind of anti-Semitism that made you frightened, just the type that ensured you knew you did not belong and it was in your best interests to try to conform.

In Scripture, they showed us pictures of the Holy Land. All we saw were churches and the Via Dolorosa and the Sea of Galilee where Jesus walked on the water. A teacher who had been there described Bethlehem to us. She regarded Palestine as a British affair, thought the place was hers and not mine. The King James Version of the Bible, she said, was a *triumph* of English literature.

'Did you go to Tel Aviv?' I asked, putting up my hand.

She frowned. 'There is nothing of any interest there.' Palestine, to her, was in a two-thousand-year-old time warp. She saw nothing later than, say, the Crusaders.

'I have heard that the British in Palestine . . .' I continued.

'No politics, if you please, Evelyn.'

But I had been brought up on politics. On our mantelpiece in the flat in Soho Uncle Joe had placed a blue and white collecting tin for the Jewish National Fund, in which we put our halfpennies, pennies, threepenny bits and sometimes even a shilling. Every birthday Uncle Joe pushed through the slot, to commemorate another year of my life, a whole half a crown.

'So part of little Evelyn,' he said, 'will make things grow in the earth of the Jewish home.' In the office at the back of his cigar shop hung framed posters of noble, muscle-bound figures tilling the soil

of Palestine. A new one arrived every year. I imagined of myself as a flower or a tree in the hands of a Jewish farmer. It was quite a thought.

On a wet Sunday afternoon in 1938, when London smelt of damp tobacco and sodden gardens and unwashed flesh, my mother and I got the tube to a cinema in Hendon and saw a film called *The Land of Promise*. We saw the Western Wall and pioneers dancing on the deck of an immigrant ship. We saw the laying of the electrical grid, drilling for water, farming on a kibbutz. We saw Jewish newspapers, a Jewish bank, a Jewish medical centre in Jerusalem, and we heard Haydn's *Creation* performed in the Mount Scopus amphitheatre. In a fiery speech at the end spoken by a trade-union leader, we were told that the Zionist homeland was Utopia Today.

My mother and I were awe-struck. A Jewish land! Everything Jewish! How could it be? We saw Uncle Joe in the audience with his other family, the four girls yawning with boredom. But Uncle Joe was the first to rise to his feet when the curtain closed and applaud and cheer. 'Next year in Jerusalem,' he shouted.

Once he showed me in a newspaper an advertisement seeking recruits for the Palestine Police.

> If your health and intelligence are good, if you're single and want a *man's* job – one of the most vital jobs in the British Empire – if you like the glamour of serving a crack force in a country of sand dunes and olive groves, historic towns and modern settlements – if you prefer this type of life on good pay *that you can save* . . . here's how you can get into the Palestine Police Force.

There was a drawing of a man in shorts and knee-length socks directing traffic. A car was coming in one direction, a donkey in the other. Below this, another picture depicted Arabs riding on camels.

'Where's the Jews, Evelyn?' Uncle Joe asked.

'Nowhere, Uncle Joe,' I replied.

'Then this picture is a lie, for Palestine is *full* of Jews.'

Of course he was a Zionist. Who wasn't back then?

Sometimes my mother and I went to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, and I would try to distinguish between those who talked sense and those who were merely crackpots – religious maniacs, vegetarians. We knew that Jews were being beaten on the streets of Vienna and Berlin. 'Down with the appeasers,' I shouted, at twelve. My mother shivered in her coat.

'What is to happen to us?' she whispered, on the bus home.

'Don't worry, Mummy,' I told her. 'I'll protect us,' for I was fierce and my fists were bunched together in fury, inside my mittens. I looked at her beloved face and thought, 'Neither of us will ever die.'

When the war started my mother and I held each other tightly as we lived through the convulsive shaking of a city tormented by air raids, passing houses turned into sticks, seeing the ruins of the white Georgian terraces near Regent's Park which when I was a child had seemed to me like high, white cliffs, hard and permanent and unscalable.

'Why can't things be nice?' my mother asked me. 'Why does someone have to spoil everything? Why can't we all just live, and be happy?'

I thought this was simple-minded but I only said, 'Because there are unjust people in the world and they have to be fought.'

'If only we had gone to America,' she replied. 'There's no war there.'

The bombs got on her nerves. She was a wreck. Last thing at night she sipped milky drinks but they did not help. She lost weight and the plump cheeks receded in her oval face, giving her a vaporous femininity. She lost herself in movie magazines and kept up to date with what the stars were doing for the war effort. 'If only we were in America,' she said. 'They'll never bomb America. We're too close, too close.'

'Don't cry, Mummy.'

'Yes. I should buck up.' And she dried her tears and repainted her lips and powdered her nose.

But at night when I lay in bed, I thought of a German invasion and of the swastika flying above Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament and ourselves rounded up, marched off to somewhere I didn't want to start imagining.

London was a huge, drab metropolis. The colour of men's uniforms imposed a khaki sameness on the world. There was too much navy blue in women's suits and dresses. Before the war, I remembered, there seemed to be more red: more red dresses and shoes, more pillar-box-red coats, more crimson and scarlet and magenta everywhere. Hair had been more visible, too – Veronica Lake peek-a-boo styles falling over the face, instead of tied back in the inevitable net snood to keep it out of your eyes while you worked at your lathe or pounded a typewriter. We were on a war footing and frivolity was banned. The Italians had been taken away and interned and the Belgians struggled to make their fabulous pastries on the ration.

From a young age I had stood at my mother's side at the salon, handing her pins and clips, listening ungratefully while she taught me everything she knew. I was sent on humble errands: to Steckyn's on Wardour Street to pick up shampoo capes and sleeping nets and snoods. As others hoarded string, we were sharp-eyed for hairpins that had strayed on buses or in the street, collecting them up in our handbags, knowing that the metal they were made of was diverted into the production of aeroplanes and helmets and ships and bombs and that these few slivers of steel had to be gathered and kept in a safe place, sometimes, when there were shortages, under lock and key.

After school and on Saturday mornings, I learned all the techniques of hairdressing and the habit has stayed in my fingers to this day. Whose hair did I dress? The mothers of the very girls I was at

school with and sometimes the girls themselves. They knew me as the hairdresser's daughter and I was excluded from their busy social lives. My true friends were in Soho and what did I feel when Gabriella, at sixteen, watched police officers take her father and older brothers off to be interned as enemy aliens, a fate which she was only spared because she had been born in England? I thought, 'We are fighting fascism but who are the anti-Semites?' Gabriella, whose father had taught me how to eat spaghetti with a spoon and fork and always tipped his hat and gave a half-bow when he passed my mother in the street, admiring her chic suit and hat with a little half-veil? Or the schoolgirls whose fathers and brothers were in the RAF or the Navy or with their regiments winning medals and who never invited me to their birthday parties?

I was seventeen and leaving school and what I wanted to be was an art student. I wanted to study at the Slade where the Jew Mark Gertler had learned to paint three decades before, and whose work spoke of a life more savage and less placid than the decorative compositions of Duncan Grant or the spare, bleak landscapes of Paul Nash with their tendency towards abstraction. I wanted the art student's life, to get away from the bourgeois conformity of my schoolfriends. I read Bertrand Russell; not the philosophy, of course, but the pamphlets on free love and marriage.

But Uncle Joe said that if I wanted to be an artist he could get me a job in an office. I could be a *commercial* artist, helping in the preparation of advertisements for things like Horlicks or aiding the war effort by designing illustrated pamphlets showing housewives how to stretch the ration or urging them to save string. Gradually, he chipped away at my confidence. Who was I to think I could be anything other than an amateur, a private painter? And if he wasn't prepared to pay, that was the end of the matter. I took the job. I walked to Holborn every morning and made tea and ran errands and watched the men in their shirt sleeves, with bow ties knotted round their necks and I

tried to pick up some techniques from them. But God, they were a dull lot, too old to fight or still waiting for their call-up papers.

Eventually they gave me a little job to do. An advert for a women's magazine for 'feminine hygiene' in which the facts of biology were rendered so vague that in the end my drawing depicted a woman sitting in an armchair with nothing more than a pained expression on her face. My boss came and took a look. 'No good,' he said. 'You've done laxatives.'

I only had to endure the office for a few months. Fate had a greater indignity for me. Something about my mother was unravelling. She was coming apart at the seams. She took more and more days off from the salon and sent me in her place. She sat at home, a nervous wreck, crying.

'Why can't things be nice?' she asked me, over and over again.

Sometimes I thought that when she addressed me, it was as one of her sisters. 'Gittel,' she said, 'make us a nice cup of tea, will you?'

'Evelyn,' I said. 'I'm Evelyn, not Gittel.'

'Yes. Evelyn. Has someone fed the horse?'

'Mother, pull yourself together.'

'Yes, I must. Mum will be back soon.'

'Stay home,' Joe said. 'Look after her.' So I did. And who could blame me for feeling so low in London, going to the salon for a couple of hours every afternoon when she was sleeping, doing perms and sets and nearly knocking myself out on the stench of peroxide in the back room.

May 1945. The war over. The camps liberated. The voices of the pacifist appeasers not believing what they found there, saying it was war propaganda. Then sitting in a darkened cinema watching the newsreels. Uncle Joe sobbing, his head on my mother's lap. Sixteen cousins gone. Sixteen.

Next day he said, 'Never mind the six million. What about the eleven million?' And he put a five-pound note in the JNF tin.

The survivors sat in the displaced persons camps. No-one wanted them. Britain said no. America said no. After a while they began to organise. They started up schools and synagogues. They elected their own police force. With the past what it was, they had nothing to do except think about the future.