

## 2. Latymer School, Edmonton

I would say you know, “Why do you have to do better?” Then I thought of a way by which I could do better. One of the pupils in my form was Queenie Roth, who later became Queenie Leavis. She married Leavis of Cambridge. And the two of us decided that we would not go into morning prayers and stand there listening to these others singing hymns [laughs]. We would say, “On religious grounds, we object.” Instead we would stay behind and she would test me out in Latin, English literature, Chemistry ... I would try to test her out in Chemistry, and so on. It was a sort of private coaching system with no payments ... it was a mutual coaching, which we had 20 clear minutes every morning of the week. It was a great help to me. I don't imagine it was much help to her, but she thought, “Well okay, all right, if he wants to give a quick *quid pro quo*, well then this will satisfy him, then he'd tell me some nonsense about Chemistry.”



**Latymer School form photograph, 1925**

*Back Row* (Left to Right). Fordham, Hindel, Abrams, Smith

*Middle Row*: Roth, Pickard, Rice, Woodfield, Barnacle

*Front Row*: Dyer, Hoskins, Moffat, Ashworth, Amos, Hobling, Strugnell (Una, later Mark's first wife).

So I stayed on there. I became a house captain and then, when the, I think it was the 1923 general election was held, parliamentary election, the Headmaster decided it was time that

the pupils learnt about politics in the real world they were growing up. And they should meet, and between them pick out three candidates – a Conservative, a Liberal and a Labour. So they did, and they picked me as the Labour candidate. And then he said, “Fine ... now what Labour candidates have to do in real life is address great audiences ...”No microphones in those days, no television, no radio. So, the big assembly hall was made available to us and we each, in turn, not on the same day -- we each had a day to ourselves, addressed the school. All I remember is that the one question that I thought was going to baffle me was, Philip Snowden had said that he disagreed with the devaluation of the pound and the Labour party officially said it was they that wanted to devalue the pound. And the question was, “How are you going to reconcile Philip Snowden’s attitude to that of your party leader?” And I said “It was not a commitment of the Labour Party to adjust itself to the views of an individual. If Philip Snowden wants to remain a member of the Labour Party, he will adjust his views towards the manifesto”. And even the teachers clapped that [laughs].

*DA: Your father must have been rather stunned by this ...*

*MA: No, he had been allowing me to go all this time to hear Keir Hardie and people like that ... David Kirkwood, [John] Wheatley, [James] Maxton, who regularly came to Edmonton. Edmonton was quite a political spot then. It was one of the first London outer boroughs to elect a Labour MP, a man called Frank Broad.*

*DA: Were your father’s own political attitudes changing as well, or was he just being tolerant of yours?*

*MA: He was being tolerant. The furthest he would go. I mean once when I was away at the LSE in the first year and I had to read Graham Wallas on human nature and politics. And I was sitting reading, and he said, “What are you reading?” And I said, “Graham Wallas, Human Nature and Politics.”<sup>1</sup> He said, “Sounds good. Who’s the author, who is this Graham Wallas?” And I said, “He is a well-known Fabian.” He said, “My God, a Fabian? That’s a politician? Ha!”, and walked away [laughs]. But that was about as far as he went.*

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Abrams adds: Graham Wallas (1858-1932) Professor of Political Science, LSE 1914-1923. Played a leading part in the creation and development of LSE from the day of its conception in August 1894 until the end of his active life. He was a lecturer at the LSE from 1895 and became its first Professor of Political Science. H.G Wells remarked in his Autobiography, “...there is scarcely any considerable figure among the younger generation of publicists who does not owe something to his slow, fussy, mannered, penetrating and inspiring counsels.” From: ‘Portraits from the Past: Graham Wallas’ by W.A. Robson from LSE Magazine, May 1971, No41, p.5

Maybe he was right! No, he thought it was alright, as long as I was always able and ready on Saturdays to help with the stall or the shop.

*DA:* Did he run a magazine or something as well, or he used to collect money or something for ...?

*MA:* He helped in his early days. There were two of them you see, there was him and my mother's brother, both active politicians. And, my uncle, that is my mother's brother, he really was a skilled worker, and his skill was printing. And he had a small, little printing workshop in the basement where he lived in the East End, and he would run off leaflets, pamphlets, statements and so on<sup>2</sup>. My father's job was to try and get money so that they could buy paper – to run off these leaflets.

And I remember him telling me about this fantastic occasion when he had a real killing. They agreed that they should find some rich sucker and take his stolen goods away from him ([laughs] (all property being stolen, of course). And the idea was that they should approach, once they'd found the idiot ... they should approach him and say, "Look, you work night and day and what do you got at the end? ... a few hundred pounds ... it's nothing. You'll wear yourself out doing this. We've got a much better scheme. We can produce false money which is so good that you will never be caught. And we will let you have it. At a half, a third, of its face value ... you'll see." And he said, "How do I know?". My father said, "Well, I'll bring some along ... we need a little notice 'cause you know we can't turn this stuff off like this ..... I'll bring some along and you will see ... and I'll stay here or go with you, and you'll buy something with these things ... you'll take it to a bank and you will see ... it will be so good they won't know." So after a week or so my father turned up with a few coins, a couple of notes, the sucker tried it out, and sure enough it was all accepted. Of course it was accepted because it was the genuine stuff! So the man said, "Okay, this I will buy. You bring me a bag full of this stuff." My father said, "It is not all that easy. We don't want to get caught. We want to plan it carefully. You will get on a bus at Gardeners Corner ... the first one that passes Gardeners corner ", (which is in the East End of London ). "The first one that passes after 9 o'clock going eastwards ... you get on first with your money, that you are going to give us for your fake money, and go upstairs. I will then get on after you with the money I'm going to give you. We will sit, you know, side-by-side almost, and I will pass you

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Walman adds: This is verified by the fact that David Issakovitch later worked as Compositor for Jewish Daily News, Bronx, New York – As stated on the 1930 USA Census. Rebecca Abrams adds. see East End Jewish Radicals by William J Fishman, a history of Jewish radicalism in the East End of London at that time. D.Isaacovitz is mentioned on p 223 as living at 1 Chance Street in 1896, from where the Yiddish anarchist newspaper was produced for a short while.

my bag and you will pass me your bag. And then the next stop you get off and I will stay on ... no one will know.” So, that is exactly what they did. And when the sucker got home and looked at this stuff, it was so obviously fake ... and so obviously counterfeit, he was absolutely furious. He found my father and said, “You cheat! You swindler! ... You told me you were going to sell me good false money and it turns out to be lousy false money!” And my father said, “Yep, I am afraid you are right and I think you ought to do something about it ... but, I will help you. The police station is just down the road and I think you should go there and tell them that you tried to buy counterfeit money from me, and I cheated you. And I will go with you and I will confirm your story that you wanted to buy this counterfeit money and, you know, I was a weakling and I fooled you. Shall we go now?” The man said, “You Lobos, you”,<sup>3</sup> which is a term of non-endorsement (in Yiddish), and the matter was dropped and they had enough money for some time.

But my uncle finally fled the country, because he organised a strike among the sweatshop workers, all women, in Leeds, to come out on strike. And he would chain himself to some railings as a protest so that it made headlines in the local Leeds paper. And sure enough he did it. But all that happened was that they cut the chain ... they took him off to the lock-up and I think he got three weeks in jail. And the girls all went back to work, and he went off to America. So that was the end of the partnership [laughs].

*DA:* So, you were at school still?

*MA:* Yep, ....went back to school and then when I was 18 they said, “You ought to go to university”.

*DA:* What was your position in the family ... were you first child or .....

*MA:* Oh god no, I’ll tell you names, and then if you want to expand on that. The eldest, the first born, was Nancy, then there was Bessie, then there was Lillie, and then there was Ida, and then there was Joe, and then there was me, and there was Hilda and then there was Frank. That should make eight.

*DA:* Plenty.

*MA:* Oh yes!

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning ‘wiseguy’ in Yiddish.

*DA:* What were your mother and father called?

*MA:* He was called Abram, and my mother was called Annie ... Ann. She never allowed Annie ... she was Ann.<sup>4</sup> Somewhere or other there is a photo of them. It is fantastic how good looking my mother was then, and how respectable my father looked. Obviously, he'd borrowed the clothes from the photographer! [laughs]

*DA:* We ought to get that copied.

*MA:* Well, I have had it copied and I sent a copy to every one of the children. And we will have ours somewhere in Brighton and I will try and find it. If I can't I will borrow one from Frank or Joe, or someone.



**Abram and Annie Abrams, approximately 1930**

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<sup>4</sup> Annie Isaakovitz was apparently known as 'the belle of Lithuania' in her youth, according to Mark's comments to Rebecca.

DA: So, did any of the other kids go to university?

MA: Well, the first one, Nancy, ran away from home at 14 ... she didn't run away, she said she was going to Uncle Dave in New York, but effectively was getting the hell out. And went off ... she worked, you know, as a waitress amongst other things. But then went to Cornell University. Where, apparently she did quite well. And then she did her thesis on a relationship between a mother and her daughter. I suppose nowadays it would be called a sociological study or an anthropological study, because it was set in a particular context. The context being the Abrams family! But it was considered pretty good, and on the basis of that she decided to begin with, that she would be a tramp ... you know, and she just wandered around America and landed up in Chicago ... went to the university. And a man called Ernest Burgess<sup>5</sup>, a grand old man of American Social Studies, particularly social gerontology and measures of life satisfaction ... all that ... took her on as an assistant. Which was a great coup for her. It would have been for anyone, to be an assistant to Burgess. But she couldn't stand working solidly in one place ... she took off again ... this time she went to New Jersey, bought a little land, and began selling milk [laughs] to the neighbours. But all the neighbours had their own cows in New Jersey. So, she decided to sell her bit of land and she heard of a place called Florida where fortunes were to be made.

**Audio note<sup>6</sup>**

MA: ... Land boom ... all you had to do was buy any piece of land and in a few years it would be worth ten times more. So, she went to Florida. And the depression came. And the land was worthless, no one wanted to buy any land. So she just abandoned it, and made her way across country to California, where she really felt at home ... there were lots of people like her. And then she thought it was time she had offspring. But she didn't want ordinary offspring, you know, too chancy. You marry someone, and there you are stuck with his offspring [laughs]. So she began looking around ... she went to Mexico ... over the border, and found the ideal father for any children she was going to have ... a Mexican lawyer. So she put the project to him ... he said, "Yes, sure, fine." And they produced a daughter, who was called Barbara, but now calls herself Barnaby. And she is now living very happily in California. She has a son who wrote to me recently and said he wants to do post-graduate

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<sup>5</sup> Burgess supervised Nancy's PhD, according to Mark's interview with Rebecca

<sup>6</sup> End of Tape side A, start of side B

work in economics in England ... should he do it at the London School of Economics, or should he go to Cambridge?

*DA: Nice choice.*

*MA: I said, neither [laughs]. Go to somewhere where life is real [laughs], like Manchester. I don't know if he took my advice. So, that's what happened to Nancy.*

*DA: What happened to the others? Went into business?*

*MA: They worked in the shop or they got jobs, with one exception. Ida became a singer.*

*DA: Did she keep the name Abrams?*

*MA: Oh sure, yea ...mmm. And this was really quite an event in our lives. Because when she began singing at concerts, that's where you had to start in those days ... little local concerts, she came into contact with someone who already sang in the chorus at Covent Garden. And he had a terrific voice. Everything was beginning of a crescendo but then moved very quickly to fortissimo [laughs]. And it was terrific to hear him sing. He used to sing in the garden ... irritate the neighbours! He also had a habit of wearing a large overcoat with the seam stitching undone so that he could go into shops and steal things, and slip them into his overcoat! We were always curious as to what he would bring home. Sometimes it was apples, sometimes it was fish, you know, depending on what business was like<sup>7</sup>. But Ida took her singing seriously and, you know, if she occasionally got opportunities, would bring in a little money as well.*

*DA: And presumably your mother was very proud of this? .....ambitions.*

*MA: Oh yes, she thought this was right and proper. The others didn't do anything out of the run ... what you would expect from that sort of life. Then she married Lew, the machine gunner.*

*DA: Did the machine gunner survive?*

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<sup>7</sup> In his interview with Rebecca, Mark says the family had a lodger called Philip who was a singer at Covent Garden, and that he used to steal food and hide it in special pockets in this coat.

MA: Until a few years ago. Yes, he got through the war all right. They had a son called Nathan ... nobody called him Nathan, he was Nate. And they came to me one day and said they had a problem ... I said, "What's the problem?", and they said "Nate has joined the Communist Party. And we wanted him to be a tailor, and we think this will interfere with his career" [laughs]. I said, "There is nothing you can do about it if he wants to be a communist. You've got to let him be a communist. If you think it is wrong, maybe he will think it wrong later on, but it is no use saying to Nate now." So Nate went off and became a communist, but he did leave, I think, oh about ten years later. So that's what happened to Ida.



**Lew Walman at 73 Town Road in 1946, and the same house in 2012**

The other two girls got married, had children. Their husbands were reasonably competent workers, and one of them was a gambling addict and I used to earn a little extra money placing bets for him. He had a system. And he knew the system would break the bookies, but once they found him putting a lot of money on greyhounds, they would get suspicious and they would warn him off. So he wanted two or three help mates. Those were boys who would go around to different bookies saying, 5 shillings on this greyhound, and the other would say put a pound on the same greyhound. His system was very simple arithmetically. He would always back the greyhound that was in the third cage. He said "Sooner or later, no matter how bad the dog is, the turn of number of 3 must come up! It's the theory of

probability”, which he’d never heard of. As a theory of probability, he said that if you spin a penny long enough, you get same number of heads as tails ... so if you have greyhounds starting, sooner or later number 3 must win. If I lose okay, next time I increase my bet so I get back up what I lost, plus something I gain from number 3. And this went on and the first week it worked! I began putting my half crown on, and at the end of week I had £5. At that point I said to him, “I am through ... I know when enough is enough. This will never happen again.” [laughs] He said, “You’ll be sorry, you’ll be sorry!”. The next I’d heard of him, he had sold everything, his clothes, the house ... everything, and put his head in a gas oven and killed himself. So, don’t take up gambling if you want a steady income. [laughs] It doesn’t work out.