

5. America (Brookings Institution)

So I came back on Friday, and he said, "It is alright, I have arranged for you a Fellowship at Brookings Institution. You can get on a boat as soon as you like and go to America."¹ And he said, "There are one or two of my friends there you might like to see. For example, there is Felix Frankfurter² – I think he is not yet on the Supreme Court, but pretty close to it. You might drop in and see him." So I dropped in to see him.

DA: Where was that?

MA: That was in, he was at Harvard, I think, then. And Frankfurter said to me, "Well, what are you going to study here." And I said, "I thought what I would study was how the decisions of the Supreme Court had affected the development of capitalism in America". He said, "What?" I repeated it. He said,([now speaking to Jean] "Wait a moment, yeah, bring it [cup of tea] in")..... And Frankfurter said, "Wait a minute. I'll call in one of my colleagues." And he call in a man called Walton Hamilton³, and described what it is I was going to do in my year at Brookings. And didn't say that I only had a year at Brookings ahead of me. And then said Hamilton, "How long do you think it would take an Englishman who has never been to America really to get a firm enough understanding of the American constitution to cope with that subject?" And Hamilton said, "Well, if he is good, he could probably manage it in two or three years." Frankfurter said, "Thank you, thank you, Walton." [laughs] And he looked hard at me and I said "Well, maybe I will have to cut it down a bit!"

And then I went straight on to Brookings where I, in fact, what I did, for the first year, was enjoy myself. We had developed a great friend there, a man called Isadore Lackman⁴, who was a doctor, but his main activity was music. He had been the music critic for the New York Times, given that up to get educated, get trained as a doctor. Come from Washington, but had never really abandoned music. And it was always possible, if a really great string quartet was performing in Washington, that Isadore would phone up and say, "Look I've got the Budapest string quartet staying at my flat. And if you come over, they can play this afternoon", or this evening, whatever it was. And so I'd go over, and there it was. That first year in Washington at Brookings was first-rate, because...

¹ In the interview with Rebecca Mark explains that Una spent 6 months learning Hebrew and converted to become Mygaya, so that they married before leaving for America.

² Felix Frankfurter (1882-1965), Jewish Supreme Court Judge from January 30, 1939 to August 28, 1962. (see Twentieth Century Jews by Monty Noam Penkower, Academic Studies Press pp 75-104.)

³ <http://ideas.repec.org/p/vic/vicddp/0104.html>

⁴ Sonia Jackson comments, I think I met Lackman with Mark a couple of times. He knew all the famous musicians. He may have written a biography of Rubenstein or perhaps he just told stories about him

DA: Did you do any work that year?

MA: No, I read bits but really what happened was, I got to know American academics of the kind that went to Washington, or who worked in Washington. For example, in that first year the American Economic Association held its annual conference in Washington and by that time one of my quite close friends, very close friends, was a negro called Abe Harris, Abram Lincoln Harris, but he was Abe Harris to everyone. And he taught at Howard University as an economist. And when the conference came around, I said, "Abe are you going?" He said, "Yes, he feels he ought to attend", and I said "Fine, I'm in the Willard Hotel. You've got pass where I am, at New Hampshire Avenue. You've got to pass there on your way. Why don't you pick me up and we can go together?" And we picked up two or three other economists on the way. We went off to the Willard Hotel. Wesley Mitchell was the President that year, a great Institutionalist Economist in America. And when we got to the front door of the Willard Hotel, the door porter looked at us and said "Yes, you, you, you, that's all right you go straight through the main entrance". Then pointing to Abe Harris, the black, he said, "There's a lift around the back for packages and cargoes and bookcases. You can use that one". And so, we said, "No. Either Professor Harris comes up with us, or none of us go up". And he said, "Okay – so none of you go up. It doesn't worry me." [laughs] And we said, "But we said we want to go to the conference." He said, "Well, if you want to go to the conference, I told you what you can do. Tell that black fellow to go to the back, and go up in the lift he will find there." So one of us went up to see Wesley Mitchell, President, and told him what had happened. Mitchell went to see the manager of the hotel and said, "Either Professor Harris comes back with me in the lift along with the other academics, or we simply cancel the conference." So Abe Harris came up. And that was one of the early breaks in segregation there. I don't think the American Economic Association ever met again there at the Willard.

But what I did with my time was occasionally to give lectures at what were called John Lead clubs. John Lead was an American communist who wrote a book called *Ten Days that Shook the World* -- the Russian revolution. And John Lead clubs were clubs of left wingers, and they wanted to know ... said would I give talks on how the unemployed in Britain were coping? What was the British Government doing in fact to be of help to the unemployed? I said "Sure, alright". I spent a little time lecturing to John Lead clubs around there. And I soon got to recognise two very ardent members of the audience, who stayed awake and never missed a single word and turned up at every one of the lectures. Two members of the police! [laughs] I didn't mind much, because there were compensations. For example, while

I was there that first year there was the Bonus Army marched on Washington – you know, the unemployed. But that sort of drifted away and what happened was that the real down and outs went to bivouac, to live out, on what was called The Jungle, which was the garbage heaps outside the city of Washington, where the hotel and restaurants had their garbage emptied. And they would try and find scraps of food to eat on this. And I went out a couple of times, to see them. And that was the first time I'd ever come across the name of a soldier called McArthur, and a soldier called Douglas. Both later on became Generals, but at that time they were chasing the unemployed out of the Jungle.

DA: Did you actually meet them?

MA: I didn't meet them because I was running too fast. And there is a nice photograph⁵ of me somewhere in the loft (at Brighton), of me running like mad through all the garbage with one of these armoured cars coming after me. That was the first year.

DA: What was ... I mean you referred to unemployment in Britain. What sort of year are we talking about?

MA: 1929/30. The Crash.

DA: Right. Yea, and what was happening in the States at that time? Was it similar?

MA: Well, yes. That's where the Crash started.

DA: Why were they concerned about Britain?

MA: They thought America was doing nothing. They would like to know if anyone was doing anything. Roosevelt hadn't really got going yet with his various relief plans. And then the second year, well, they let me stay on for a second year, against the rules – those scholarships are supposed to be for one year. Anyway I stayed on for a second year and wrote a book called *Money in the Twentieth Century – A Study of the Trade Cycle*.

DA: Where was it published?

⁵ Not yet located

MA: It was published by John Lane in England in, I think, almost as soon as I got back – which must have been 1931. I think that was the date. Anyway, it was John Lane – the Editor of the series was Krishna Menon, who had been one of my friends at the LSE. And of course Trade Cycle Theory - Depression theory was the subject. And this was possibly, but I don't know, but possibly, in English, the first exposition of what 50 years later is known to everyone as monetarist theory of the trade cycle. Erm, not a bad book, I suppose.

DA: Well received?

MA: Yes. One reviewer in I think Econo.. not *Economica*, in the *Clear Market Review*, which was a journal of London School of Economics, said, "Abrams, in his book of money has done for Hayek", who was already the great man, "has done for Hayek what [Arthur] Eddington has done for God. We understand him, but we don't agree with him." [laughs].

At the end of the two years I came back. And for a while I earned a little money coaching backward students at the LSE.

DA: Do you think the book turned out to be an advantage in terms of your career, your development? Or what kind of part did it play in your longer term do you think?

MA: I think it cured me of any itch to be an economist. That the part it played in my career, that I realised that it was not for me. This business of arguing about unidentifiable things, which couldn't be substantiated by empirical data and so on. I got it out of my system.