

Autobiography

JOSEPH SOLOMON

My parents arrived in the United States in 1902, each having made the trip from Czarist Russia in steerage. Their immigration was, in part, a result of my father's desire to avoid the harsh military service imposed at that time. My mother Rebecca, whose maiden name was Lavonsky, was a native of Bialystok. My father, Abraham Szykowski, was born in Grodno. They were married in New York in December, 1902, after which the struggling pair moved to a cold-water tenement on New York City's Lower East Side (286 East 2nd Street)—the first of many such lodgings. My father, influenced by my mother's half brother who owned a paint shop on Ninth Avenue, became a house painter. Shortly after I was born (1905), my folks moved to 344 West 17th Street. At the suggestion of the janitor of that building, they changed their name from Shelkowsky (which they had adopted on their arrival, but which was often misspelled or mispronounced by Americans) to the simpler and more easily spelled "Solomon." Ever since then the name Solomon has been used by every member of our family who emigrated to this country.

In 1913 my paternal grandfather, hoping to make a better life for his family, came to the United States. The effort was not successful, and in 1914, prior to the outbreak of World War I, he returned to Russia. We never saw him again.

In 1913, we settled into a four-room apartment at 230 East 99th Street, on the border of East Harlem. There we remained for

eleven years, until April, 1924, when we moved to The Bronx. Our family had lived in a number of tenements, all cold-water, all in undesirable neighborhoods, and the Bronx apartment at that time seemed a luxury. Although still in a tenement neighborhood, the apartment offered a privacy we had never known, with our own toilet (the other tenements had had communal toilet facilities in the hall), the use of hot water, and a gas stove. There was a public bathhouse on 109th Street, where for five or ten cents one could take a hot bath. To obtain heat, we were compelled to go down to the basement where the coal and wood were stored and carry baskets of fuel up six flights of stairs. In the summer we would buy 15¢ or 25¢ worth of ice from a peddler who drove an ice wagon to fill our wooden ice box. From time to time the gas meter would require a quarter.

I REMEMBER GYP THE BLOOD

The new luxury of "privacy" was, however, overshadowed by the toughness of the area. Neighborhood youths formed gangs—each gang, in the main, being made up along ethnic lines—and there was constant "warfare" among them. I remember having my skates stolen on one occasion, my new cap on another occasion. One had always to be wary of the bricks which flew indiscriminately from rooftops. Many of these gang members were ex-inmates of the city's prison. Some were to die in the electric chair at Sing Sing. I remember such names as Lefty Louie, Gyp the Blood, Whitey Lewis, Dago Frank, all of whom lived on 97 Street and who were later executed for the murder of the gambler, Herman Rosenthal.

At the age of six and a half, I began public school. P. S. 109, at 215 East 99th Street, was the first, and I kept transferring from one to another in the neighborhood from time to time.

I recall vividly that we were almost asphyxiated by coal gas fumes which seeped into our apartment early one morning. Luckily, neighbors detected the odor, broke into our apartment, and succeeded in reviving us. If not for them, my entire family would probably have expired.

In the summer months we would go swimming off the 96th Street East River docks. All recreational games were played on

the streets, no other facilities in the vicinity being then available. On hot nights we would sleep on the fire escape or on the roof of the building.

Because our family was so desperately poor, I began working at an early age. After school each day I made deliveries from one store to another for the sum of ten cents plus carfare. On Saturdays I labored on a horse-drawn fruit and vegetable cart from six in the morning until ten at night, carrying orders up to people who called down from their windows. For the day's work I was paid one dollar. I spent Sundays selling newspapers at Lexington Avenue and 86th Street.

Tragedy struck our family in 1916, when my brother Philip, an exceptionally handsome four-year-old, fell prey to polio. His case was Manhattan's first in the sweeping epidemic of 1916. The medical authorities were baffled. They could find no remedy for his paralyzed right arm and immobile knees. He was placed in Mt. Sinai Hospital for a time. Later my mother would carry the helpless child from home to hospital for treatment. Our heartbroken family grieved to see him so helpless. To give him rest and care and to relieve the family's pressing hardship, Philip was placed in the Montefiore Sanitarium Hospital at 210th Street in The Bronx. I visited him as often as possible, making the hours-long journey by streetcar. My brother eventually regained the use of his legs, but to this day his right arm remains paralyzed.

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS IN SILVER COINS

With eight children in the family our financial situation became more and more desperate. Mrs. Bauer, of Mt. Sinai Hospital's Department of Social Service, suggested to my parents that I go to a winter camp for a couple of weeks to lighten the burden. In October, 1917 (that year was extremely severe), when in the seventh grade, I was sent to the Surprise Lake Camp for underprivileged children; there I remained—not for a couple of weeks—but until the season's end in June of the following year. When the Director—a Mr. Katzenstein—asked if I would like to stay on and work as a busboy during the summer, I jumped at the opportunity which would enable me to stay until after Labor

Day. The campers slept in tents, away from city streets and grimy city air. I will never forget the expression on my mother's face when I handed her \$100 in silver coins—money I had hoarded from tips at camp—upon returning home. It had been almost a year since I had seen any member of my family. In later life, as a member of the Board of Directors of what was by then known as the Eddie Cantor Camp, I was able to reciprocate in kind by channeling financial gifts to the place that had given me my first exposure to fresh air and green horizons.

Before the age of thirteen I had received some religious training—in the form of lessons given during late afternoons in a dingy makeshift room in a tenement basement. The charge was 50¢ a lesson—a major expenditure for my family—but my parents felt it necessary to provide me with a foundation in Judaism. The rabbi, an elderly man, devoted the greater part of his time to punishing delinquent members of the class—teaching being secondary to the dominant necessity of keeping order. Regretfully, I had no bar mitzvah.

While I was at Surprise Lake Camp, the public school sent my diploma to my home, permitting me upon my return to the City in the fall of 1918 to register at the High School of Commerce. Unfortunately, the family's financial situation did not allow me to attend school during the day, since we needed any money I could bring in by working. The Social Service Department of Mt. Sinai put me in touch with a wonderful woman, Mrs. Leopold Bache, who sent me to see Harold Nathan, a cousin of Judge Benjamin N. Cardozo and a senior partner in the prestigious law firm of Leventritt, Cook, Nathan & Lehman. David Leventritt was formerly a justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, and Alfred A. Cook was then counsel to the *New York Times*. Mr. Nathan offered, and I accepted, a job as messenger for his firm at a salary of \$10 a week. The year was 1919.

In years to come, after my admission to the bar, I was able to repay in some measure the kindness of these people who influenced my life so greatly. I handled the estate of Mrs. Bache's husband as well as the legal affairs and estates of other members of the Bache family. I still administer Harold Nathan's estate, both as fiduciary and attorney, and have handled the estates of all members of the Nathan family and the Cook family as well.

It has been said of the law, "Cast thy bread upon its waters; it

shall be returned to you manifold." I have never forgotten the fact that the Social Service Department of Mt. Sinai was instrumental in the launching of my legal career. Through the years I have become deeply involved in Mt. Sinai affairs and have many times acted as counsellor and advisor to clients wishing to make substantial contributions to the Hospital. In other instances where I had been given the right to dispose of estate funds to charities, I have designated Mt. Sinai a worthy recipient. Further, I have been the lawyer for the Alumnae Association of the Mt. Sinai School of Nursing since 1946. On June 16, 1975, I was presented with a special Citation from The Mount Sinai Medical Center for my participation in the activities of the Hospital.

THE JURY FOUND FOR THE PLAINTIFF

I worked very hard, arriving at the office of the law firm at eight in the morning and working without a break until late at night—a habit that has persisted to the present. Ten months after being hired, while delivering a letter to a brokerage firm on Beaver Street, I was dumbfounded when the receptionist offered me \$13 a week to work for them. Returning with great excitement to Harold Nathan, I relayed the news, telling him I would prefer to stay with his firm, but that my family needed the extra three dollars. I reminded him after two weeks had passed that the other firm had been in touch with me, and finally he agreed to match the offer. Shortly thereafter I was promoted to assistant managing clerk, which resulted in my being sent on more interesting errands, including those into the courts. My interest in the field of law was growing steadily, but looking around at the graduates of prestigious Ivy League schools in our office, I felt that I would suffer by comparison and, indeed, that I even lacked the qualifications for entry into law school. For several years I floundered, uncertain as to my future and what I should do about it. I considered studying accounting, but the law was far more appealing and continued to intrigue me.

I was now privileged to witness many interesting and important legal battles. I shall never forget the days I carried a briefcase from our office to the court house for Judge Joseph M. Proskauer, who had been retained by our office to defend a law

suit instituted against one of our clients, an accounting firm. Max D. Steuer, the well known trial lawyer, represented the plaintiff. I was permitted to sit at the counsel table between them. It was exhilarating for me to see two great lawyers pitted against each other. The case was tried before Judge Irving Lehman (elected to the Court of Appeals in November, 1924) and a jury. After ten days of trial, the jury found for the plaintiff in an amount in excess of one million dollars. After considerable argument by the lawyers, Judge Lehman reduced the amount of the verdict to \$2,000, and this verdict was later affirmed by the appellate courts. It was a great victory, and I participated in the thrill of "taking part" therein.

Before my admission to the bar, I was fortunate to be able to accompany the members of our office who tried and defended law suits in the various courts—and particularly the libel suits brought against the *New York Times*.

In 1919 I became a member of the 92nd Street YMHA. A group of young men, including myself, formed a club called "Elbon"—"noble" spelled backwards. Regular meetings of this club were held, either at the "Y" or at a member's home. This was a happy association which continued for many years, until our last meeting in 1938. Each summer the club rented a bungalow in Coney Island. In June, 1924, however, the club's summer residence changed to Edgemere—a fortunate development for me. It was there that I first met Rita, who became my wife five years later. She was living with her stepbrother, the writer Alexander King, in the bungalow next to ours. At the ceremony establishing a professorship in my name at Columbia University School of Law, I commented with some measure of understatement: "I would be remiss if I did not make reference to a particular individual to whom I am especially indebted—my wife, Rita. My chosen field has made a very heavy demand upon my time away from home and I would like to give now some public acknowledgment of gratitude to my wife for her unfailing understanding and encouragement through the years."

STUDYING IN TRANSIT

The attraction of the legal profession had become more and



Photo by Blackstone-Shelburn, New York

Joseph Solomon

more irresistible. At last, determined to overcome all obstacles, I began to move toward the goal of educating myself for the law. Attending Harlem Cooperative Preparatory School for the school year 1923-1924 in the evenings, I made up the requirements of Spanish, German, algebra, and modern and ancient history in a single year. I took the Regents qualifying examinations, then went on a hitchhiking tour of New York State with one of my friends. We spent two weeks on the road and then on the way home stopped at the office of the Department of Education in Albany, where I learned of the successful outcome of my Regents examinations. New York Law School had accepted my application for admission, subject to my qualifying for a certificate of admission. In September, 1924, I entered New York Law School, which was at that time located in the YMCA building at 23rd Street and Seventh Avenue. For three years I shuttled back and forth between law school and the law office at which I worked. Alfred A. Cook and Harold Nathan had offered to advance the tuition, but I did not want to be in debt and rejected their gracious overture. Instead, I arranged to make weekly payments from my salary. Working during the day, attending classes at night, studying in transit and sleeping whenever possible, I completed law school in June, 1927, took a bar review course taught by Judge Harold Medina, and passed the bar examination on my first try. In November, 1975, I was honored by the establishment of "The Joseph Solomon Professorship of Law" at New York Law School—the first Chair to be endowed in the history of the school.

Because I had no college degree the rules of the court of appeals for admission of attorneys required that I serve a continuous year of clerkship, which I did from June, 1927, to June, 1928. I was then sponsored by Harold Nathan for admission to the bar. When I appeared before the full Committee on Character and Fitness of Applicants for Admission to the Bar, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, First Judicial Department, the only question that was put to me related to the reason for the change of the family name. I was admitted to the bar late in December, 1928.

In January, 1929, I became a member of the legal staff of the firm for which I had originally been a messenger boy. This

achievement appeared then as the culmination of my lifelong efforts, and the elation I felt was truly intoxicating. At long last I was on my way!

ARCHIVES POSTERS

The American Jewish Archives has issued a number of multi-colored posters dealing with the American Jewish experience:

- Jewish participation in the Civil War (6)
- Immigrants from Eastern Europe (3)
- Episodes in eighteenth-century American Jewish Life (3)
- Abba Hillel Silver at the United Nations (1)
- Jews and the American Revolution (6)
- Distinguished American Jewish women (7)

These posters are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations, and organizations interested in American Jewish history.

When properly matted and mounted on heavy cardboard, these posters make an attractive exhibit.

Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.