

5.

A SPOT OF TEA FOR LONDON'S JEWS

Alex Lyons

[1]





Elderly Man: *Where does your name come from? Are you French?*

Me: *No, English.*

Elderly Man: *Wait... Hang on... Are you related to the Lyons Tea Rooms?*

I have never had a problem with my name before; I even used to quite like it. My *bubbeh* used to tell me how great-granddad Sid had changed his surname from Swerdloff to Lyons so that he would be taken as an Englishman.

The story goes that one day he saw a Lyons Tea Room and thought to himself that Lyons must be a well-to-do English name, given that there is nothing more quintessentially English than a tea room. It is a rather romantic image of a young Jewish immigrant trying to fit into the hostile East End of London. However the romanticism was to soon fade.

As we grew older *bubbeh* revealed that he changed the name to increase his job prospects, to which we would ask why he had to change his name to get a job. Recently

she let slip that the change occurred after the Second World War, to which we would again ask, 'why did he do that? The English had after all defeated the Nazis by then'.

Up until now I had never thoroughly investigated any of these theories. However there was something quite nauseating about this conversation with the elderly gentleman that made me want to know more.

The one fair assumption we can make from *bubbeh's* story is that Sid definitely wanted to be perceived as English. However it remains unclear whether he really desired to be more English or if this was simply meant to be a disguise.

The more blatant theories of why point to a fear of anti-Semitism at the time; with Moseley's *blackshirts* fresh in everyone's memory. Like most of my family Sid had experienced the rise of the fascists in the 1930s. However, in juxtaposition to this *bubbeh* would also describe Sid as a pompous *guntzer k'nucker*.



The Perception of Englishness

I had never thought much of the Lyons brand before apart from a cursory recognition of our shared name. I only ever saw the name plastered across supermarket shelves; on boxes of budget tea bags, cakes and biscuits. I used to try and visualise Sid dunking his tea bag up and down in his mug as he sucked on his pipe. I had never realised until now the full extent of the J. Lyons & Co enterprise.

At its peak Lyons was an empire. They established tearooms up and down the country, including four apartment store sized Lyons Corner Houses in the West End. They owned state of the art food manufacturing factories that were so technologically advanced that they could produce arms for the army.

They catered to garden parties for the royal family at Buckingham Palace along with functions at the Guild Hall and Wimbledon Tennis Championships. Their operations had transcended the British Isles and spread throughout the English colonies. There were cocoa plantations in the Gold Coast (Ghana) and tea

growing estates in Nyasaland (Malawi). They were in South Africa, Kenya and Rhodesia too. They even designed the first business computer system. In a nutshell, they optimised the English sentiment and identity of the time. They were gallant, sophisticated and civilised. Words that we now associate with imperialism, snobbery and slavery.

In London the corner houses appeared extravagant, continental and luxurious. They were fitted with all the latest and fashionable art-deco furniture from France. On the menu the exotic characteristics were translated into English for practicality; you could dine on Macaroni Cheese À L'Italienne, Eggs À La Suisse and Caviar On Toast to the backing track of a live



orchestra. At the same time these emporiums were more archetypally English. Victorian-esque waitresses, nicknamed *nippies*, would speed through the tables serving household favourites such as Lamb Cutlets and Swiss Rolls. To a young Jewish man like Sid, they must have seemed like a class above the soup kitchens of the East End.

That was my granddad Sid for you. In contrast my other great-granddad Tooney was a popular face in the East End. He was a boxer who worked in the *shmata* business. He was proud of his working class and Jewish roots. In one fight he recalls how he wouldn't let his opponent 'hit the floor' because prior to the contest he had cockily boasted how he was going to beat 'a sheeny'. In his later years he even used to write down memoirs of all the different streets in the Jewish East End; Hessel Street, Christian Street and Commercial Road. One of them reads;

Christian Street running parallel to Grove. Uncle Max the pawnbroker and jeweller on the corner with commercial road. A salt beef shop facing. We brought saveloy sandwiches for 2' each with a wally thrown

in. A billiard hall. "The kids" run by Arelah who also promoted boxing there. Winnicks Furniture Factory. Commercial Road Talmud Torah. Rothstein's Bakery on Friday afternoons saw a procession of small boys carrying large saucepans of cholent, trays of kichles and cakes heading for Rothsteins to cook while his ovens cooled over Shabbus. There was the parrot woman whose bird only spoke Yiddish. Felds original salt beef shop and Levitt the bootmaker.

To Tooney, both Jewish and English identities were intertwined. Perhaps the attitude of his boxing trainer, the famous Harry Mizler had rubbed off on him. Harry boxed for England in the 1932 Olympics with a Union Jack on one leg and the Star of David on the other.

Strangely Sid was probably the more religious of the two; he used to attend the Shabbat service every Saturday with his *yarmulkha* and *tallit*. Perhaps this is why he felt the need to conceal his identity.

Anglo-Jewish Degeneration

Initially I traced the sickening feeling I experienced during the conversation with

the elderly gentleman to colonial guilt. The discussion took place in an art gallery in Kampala and the sudden realisation that my great-grandfather may have aspired to be like the aristocratic colonialists made my stomach turn. I had always distanced my lineage away from colonialism, arguing that my family were poor immigrants who had fled the pogroms. I claimed them to be equal victims of English nationalism as they were verbally and physical targeted as the scapegoats of the great depression. At the same time the government poured its capital into imperialist projects whilst they were struggling to make ends meet at home.

However my newfound awareness had displaced me and I now felt the full weight of responsibility for the horrors the British had inflicted.

Even if my family had been marginalised in England, they were still accepted as citizens and offered the chance to assimilate. Where in the colonies the British imposed and implemented their structures and culture on other civilisations, violently cleansing anyone in their way. This became an important moment of increased consciousness for me, even if, the history I was contemplating still felt removed from my everyday being.

Yet what began to upset me was not what my great-granddad was changing his name to but rather what he changed his name from. Why would he want to conceal his Jewish roots? Tooney never hid his, he was born Jacob Solomons and he died Jacob Solomons. He got his nickname because his Yiddish speaking grandmother could not pronounce the word tiny when he was born.

I started to reimagine my whole life if Swerdloff had been my name. Swerdloff where's your homework? Pass the ball Swerly. Alexander Benjamin Smirnoff who can only take a girl's drink. At least nobody

[3]





would have asked if I was French.

But it wasn't just Sid who abandoned the bubble of Jewish life that existed in the East End. They all did. Tooney was discharged from the army because of a heart murmur. His house was bombed in the Blitz along with all his boxing trophies. They made him a token one as a reminder which my *bubbeh* still keeps today. He moved his family out of the East End to Finchley Road in North London. They kept his electrical shop on Commercial Road for a while but eventually that went too.

Today there are only two synagogues left in the East End, it is hard to find a *kosher* butcher anywhere and as *bubbeh* recounts about her father Davis Weiner's poultry dealership I begin to feel deflated. My father married out of the faith and moved down to Sussex. We are lucky if we still go to *bubbehs* to celebrate *Pesach* or *Rosh Hashana*. The assimilation is almost complete. All we are left with is the Lyons parable.

--->

GLOSSARY:

Blackshirts - Members of the British Union of Fascists who wore black uniforms at political rallies during the 1930's. The uniforms were outlawed following the Battle of Cable Street in 1936.

Bubbeh - Yiddish word for Grandmother

Cholent - A big pot of stew cooked overnight before the Sabbath and eaten for Shabbat to respect the day of rest

Guntzer K'nucker - Yiddish derogatory expression for a big shot, a show off or braggart

Kichles - Pickled small crackers

Kosher - Food that may be eaten according to halakha (Jewish Law)

Pesach - The Jewish holiday of Passover

Pogrom - An anti-Semitic massacre of Jews in the former Russian Empire

Rosh Hashana - Jewish New Year

Saveloy - A sausage normally brought from a British fish and chip shop

Shmata - Yiddish word for rag, the *shmata* trade is the second hand clothes business

Tallit - A Jewish prayer shawl that covers the back and shoulders

Wally - Cockney slang for a small pickle

Yarmulka - A kippah (skull cap) worn by Jews to cover their heads

Alex Lyons is an independent producer living and working in Kampala, Uganda. He can be reached at alexbenjaminlyons@gmail.com

[1] Left centre is my great-grandfather Tooney boxing

[2] *Tsibeles* is part of a Yiddish insult that goes 'May you eat chopped liver with onions, shmaltz herring, chicken soup with dumplings, baked carp with horseradish, braised meat with vegetable stew, latkes, tea with lemon, every day - and may you choke on every bite'

[3] Tooney and his mother. An *aidim* is a son-in-law and *m'chooten* is a father-in-law