I AUTOBIO

(2)

COMMON SENSE

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Let no one say that you need a state to make bureaucracy grow and flourish. Fifteen years before the founding of Israel, in fact when first I set foot on the soil of the land of my fathers, I ran up against the ramparts of a cast-iron bureaucracy.

After the reception committee of the Mandatory, there came a representative of the Jewish Agency. He asked a lot of questions and filled a lot of forms. In the end he provided me with something called an immigrant's card and commanded me to proceed from the port of Jaffa to the city of Tel Aviv, where at a certain address another representative of the Jewish Agency would "process me further". I objected.

"I don't want to be processed, and I don't want to go to Tel Aviv. I want to go to my kibbutz, Sadot."

The Agency man looked shocked, but only for a moment. Then he said the same words again, as if I hadn't spoken.

"But why? What do you mean, to be processed?"

"Don't be obstreperous. You have to get shots. Things must be done in an orderly manner. Next."

I hefted my back-pack and left the port area. At the next bank, I changed my remaining Swiss francs and Italian lire into two pounds something, proceeded to a little restaurant and had an interesting lunch for a small part of the something. I slung my pack again and went on foot in a Northerly direction. I thought I had better take the shots.

So I asked directions from a well-dressed man who looked very Jewish. He stared at me for a moment with liquid, dark-brown eyes and announced in a quiet, well-modulated voice:"Telkhas tisi."

Later inquiry brought to light that this was Arabic for "Kiss my arse." I tried somebody else in my basic Hebrew and got a reply in Yiddish. By a process of trial and error I arrived at my destination. After waiting my turn, I was received by a cheerful old man who - what else? - registered me again. He handed me a great number of chits and coupons and said:

"This is breakfast, lunch and dinner at the "Good Appetite" restaurant for three days. Here are three nights at the hotel Greenspan. This is for

your shots at the sick fund - typhus, typhoid, malaria. Go look at Tel Aviv and have a good rest for three days, then I'll give you a chit for the labour exchange."

"Comrade," I said, "I have now rested for three months. I feel sufficiently strong to start working. I don't want to stay in Tel Aviv. I want to get my shots today and go to my kibbutz, Sadot."

The man apparently had not heard me. He repeated his last speech word for word. I decided that he must be hard of hearing. I leaned over his desk and repeated my request loudly and clearly.

"Don't shout at me! I heard you the first time. There's no such thing. You have to stay three days in Tel Aviv."

My patience was running short. I gave the desk a hearty whack.

"And who are you to tell me what I have to do? Either you get me my shots right away, or I shall go to Sadot without them."

I got my shots, all in one go. I even managed to catch the last train to Hadera, which was then still base camp to our Everest expedition of setling in Wadi Hawarith as kibbutz Sadot.

It was a long trudge from Hadera station to Hadera, and a long search for the camp, which was a motley assembley of wooden huts around a none too clean square yard. The place was almost abandoned, and I did not know the few people I met. When I introduced myself, I was told to see one Froike who was in charge while the camp was being wound up. He was not in the hut used as a dining room. Another hut was pointed out to me. I went to the door and knocked.

This was, by all accounts, a solemn moment in my life. Here, not only my personal wanderings were coming to an end:My people, having roamed the earth for nigh two-thousand years, sometimes persecuted, sometimes tolerated, would come into its own here, and I was to prepare the ground. Even more important, the kibbutzim, small enclaves all over the country, would put an end to exploitation and injustice:A classless and money-less society, we would have neither exploiters nor exploited, everything would be owned by all, everything would be decided by a simple majority of all members. This beautifully simple conception would bring socialism in our time to those who wanted it - and I was to be part of the future.

There was light inside the hut, but there was no answer to my knock. I waited and knocked again. No reply.

I did not want to be impolite. Behind this door there lurked no repre-

sentative of any establishment - just a comrade. It was after eight, and even a kibbutz member has a right to privacy. But, for all that, I had to sleep somewhere. I was prepared for danger, adventure and even crime in the wild and woolly East, but not for a lack of hospitality. I knocked again - a little louder.

A yawn came from inside. I decided to take this for a positive reply and entered. A very long, very thin man sat on a cot opposite me, an oil lamp at his side. His head was concealed by a newspaper. Without removing this, he asked in a deep bass voice:"What is it?"

"Are you Froike?"

The man removed the paper and said he was. He had a small bullet-head with a poker face and light-blue eyes. I am used to looking at people I speak with. Froike's eyes managed to avoid mine with uncanny agility.

"I am Teddy from the Vienna Zionist-Socialist youth movement. I arrived today."

Froike did not say he was pleased to meet me. He did not say I was welcome. He said:"You should be in Sadot."

"I hope to get there tomorrow, but now I'm here. I would like a place to sleep and something to eat. And a work assignment."

Froike looked puzzled. "You can sleep in the second hut to the right. Any cot you like. You can go to the kitchen and see if there's any food left. You don't have to work yet. You have three days to look around."

Three days seemed to be the standard allotment. I told my tale about having had three months.

"All right. Tomorrow at seven, you can help load two wagons with stuff for Sadot."And Froike vanished behind his paper again.

I found some bread and margarine in the kitchen. There was only one occupant in the second hut to the right - a member of another kibbutz who was staying overnight. The cots had palliasses but no bedding or blankets. I put my sleeping-bag on the bed, my pack and clothes at the head and my boots at the foot. I had had a long day and slept instantly, but I had some confusing dreams. The old clerk from Tel Aviv kept running after me with a whole armoury of syringes. Froike, wigged and gowned, announced from the judge's bench:"You have three days to appeal the sentence." A parrot with beautiful dark-brown eyes said to me, over and over:"Telkhas tisi. Telkhas tisi." Somebody woke me. It was six.

My boots had vanished. I put on sandals and showered. There were eight

or ten people in the dining-room having breakfast, among them Froike. I sat next to him and said:

"I'm sorry I won't be able to come to work. Someone lifted my boots."

"Don't you have any others?"

"No. Only light sandals."

"Can't you work wearing those?"

"Perhaps I could. But I don't like the idea of someone dropping a packing case on my naked foot."

Froike said nothing and went out.

I fetched my breakfast. There was good tea, atrocious bread, margarine and some tasteless synthetic jelly doubling for jam.

When I finished breakfast, Froike came back, my boots in his hands.

"Froike, you're a miracle! Where were they?"

"Cobbler."

"Cobbler? How did they get there?"

Froike did not reply, but the very speed of the recovery seemed suspicious. Perhaps Froike himself had lifted them and flogged them for a pound or two? Perish the thought.

All day I stowed cases, cots, kitchen equipment and odds and ends on farm waggons. I unhitched mules from empty to loaded wagons, fed and watered them. Lunch was just edible. I met no-one I knew, and nobody showed any interest in me.

I hitched a ride on the last waggon to leave for Sadot, and I felt like a Moslem looking at his bride for the first time after the wedding.

Dusk was falling, but the naked blue hills far to the East still caught the sunlight. We followed first a fieldpath, then only wagontracks to the South-East. We left the eucalyptus copses round Hadera behind us. We crossed the rolling plain - some fields, now just stubble, then sandy soil on the ridges, heavy clay down in the wadis. I saw camels for the first time. We passed a few beduin tents. Children stared at us. The driver nudged me.

"Those are our neighbours, the Beni Majadra. Nice chaps, really, during the day, very polite, only at night they come and harvest our vegetables. Sometimes they shoot at us, but it's all in a friendly spirit."

I wondered how you shoot at people in a friendly spirit when we came to a high barbed-wire fence. We drove through a gate and past a water-tower on a hillock into a yard bordered to the East by sheds, barns and stables and to the West and South by the wooden dining-hall and wooden shacks.