

The Old Schule

Sliding down the banister was one way to get out of Uncle Lenny's clutches before the sermon. Another was to stroll out to the balcony during the repetition of the Amidah, and then duck into one of the side rooms that gave access to the same balcony from the other side of the building. But Reverend Gur's placid nature was indifferent to Daddy-Long-Leg's ardent attempts to instill a little torah into the younger generation and he would have been content to deliver his words to a single adult male and the doll-like ten-year old who always sat quietly through the whole service. Yet somehow we all managed to drift back in time for Adon Olam. Our preference was for that rollicking version in which every phrase is repeated, but we sometimes acceded to the more dignified strains preferred by Uncle Lenny and his lantern-jawed cousin.

The schule at that time was situated on the top floor of the old mansion. Two large adjoining rooms had originally occupied the same space but the wall between them had been knocked down to form a broad gallery that spanned the whole eastern side of the building. The cornices were painted in pale blue and soft pink, so that if you raised your eyes from the siddur, you might imagine yourself gazing into the heavens. The bima was placed in the middle of this spread and though we knew we were not facing Jerusalem, we were at least paying homage to the veteran Jewish communities of the Eastern Suburbs.

For those of us who were still light enough to do so, it was fun to bounce up and down on the S-shaped tubular aluminium chairs that were used for seating. Some believed they had been purchased for their resemblance to the letter 'lamed'. Anyway, the maroon ones seemed to have better recoil, although the royal blues were not bad either. We boys could also look forward to the privilege of holding the Torah after it was dressed or perhaps even holding a chumash throughout the service in order to be counted as the tenth adult male to make up the minyan.

It was never a problem to get a minyan during the festivals. On Yom Kippur the broad gallery became a cramped chamber of shuffling feet, sweating bodies and mysterious happenings taking place around the bima. The overflow was accommodated on benches set out in the wide hallway that led into the schule from the top of the staircase. Prayer was conducted to the accompaniment of creaking knees, fervent mumbling, agonised breast-beating and unabashed, but muted, conversation. Momentary relief could be had by inhaling the scent of a large lemon studded with cloves. These, being fragile and few, were delicately passed up and down the women's rows then deftly handed across the aisle to the men's side.

By 1956 these arrangements had become inadequate and services were moved to the Strathfield Town Hall for the duration of the High Holidays. This was opportune for the family that lived just across the road and could thereby feel righteously observant by walking to schule. On the other hand, their lounge-room became the roost for a favoured few who, no less pious but living further away, sought to take a nap during the hour between Musaf and Mincha.

But Yom Kippur was the exception to the rule. The sad reality was a never-ending struggle for a minyan on Saturday mornings, the members of the community being scattered throughout the Western Suburbs. Families came to schule – when they came – driving from Campsie and Kingsgrove, from Belfield and Bexley, from Fivedock and Fairfield and from as far afield as

Parramatta and Punchbowl. And no-one, least of all the Minister, would have the temerity to say a word against them for doing so.

Yet on cold winter evenings, when someone wanted to say kaddish for a departed mother or father, it was never a problem to round up a minyan from the surrounding streets. Three post-barmitzva schoolboys lived on Redmyre Rd, two more on Barker Rd and one just around the corner on Chalmers Rd. With the promise of a lift home after a quick recitation of Maariv, none would refuse.

Eventually the old mansion was pulled down, and with it the original schule. On the same site, with an eerily reminiscent structure, was built a block of classrooms and a kindergarten. After all, the schule was always about education and Uncle Lenny's heart was always in the right place.

We, the children who grew up there, pass these memories on to our own.

by Geoff Toister
October, 2013