

I get a bike

At 13, my whole life changed, quite apart from the fact that this (according to Jewish custom) is the age of manhood (huh!). We were much too poor to give me the indulgence of a barmitzvah, so we just went through the motions. I was given the ritual scarf, silk with a fringe at each end, and started to attend synagogue. There I was expected to learn Hebrew, and thus read through the Old Testament, and also learn to chant (or mutter) the ritual prayers. Since I was by this time a confirmed atheist, I did not get very far with this program. In fact, after a few weeks, I refused to attend any more Hebrew lessons. I think dad was neutral about the whole thing, but mum thought I should continue, since "it's all knowledge". Religion, we all agreed, had nothing to do with it. We observed none of the domestic rituals, but mum in particular stressed how important it was not to upset people. So we didn't travel on the Sabbath, or play noisy games. Dad had no time for religion, and had strong socialist ideas. There were plenty of left-wing books in the house, and I went through an obsessive reading phase. Most of Bernard Shaw, H G Wells and various science-fiction.

This was all happening against a background of dramatic changes in my daily life. I entered and passed a "trade" examination, and from then on said goodbye to the academic life. I found myself attending a 3-year full-time course at Hackney Technical Institute, biased towards engineering. Hence the emphasis was on the sciences, as well as English, maths, history and geography. This was wonderful - no more tyrannical headmasters, with people who treat you as a human being. In particular, Mr Rosten, the maths teacher, encouraged me greatly, and I began to develop the affinity for maths which I still have. I started to do well at school, and mum started to be proud of me; she and Mr Rosten got on fine together. I started to meet other people with strong political views, among them John Tuchfeld. He was a highly articulate communist, and we supported each other in the many discussions (arguments?) which sprang up. Since this was at the time (during the war) when the Soviet Union was recognised as an ally, there was a great deal of political ferment around the ideas of socialism and communism. At home, mum and dad had always been left-wing, but dad insisted on democratic socialism. Muriel and I became active communists; she joined the YCL and later on so did I, although I never acquired a sense of belonging.

Another event now occurred with life-changing consequences: I was given a bicycle. This was a 24" wheel roadster with a single freewheel, and it had chromium-plated accessories - very rare then. It had belonged to my cousin Ronnie, but since his mother (Auntie Nellie) was too nervous to let him ride it outside their playground, she asked mum "if Sidney would like a bicycle". Mum was never one to turn down a free gift, so I got my first bike. I got on it in the playground, just outside the porch, and turned the pedals. Off I went, but the steering seemed to have a mind of its own. I turned remorselessly and irrevocably towards the wall of the block of flats in which I lived, and hit it. At first, like cousin Ronnie, I was allowed to ride my bike only in the playground. Mum knew that I had started to go "round the block", but she said nothing, apart from recommending caution. I soon found a friend with a bike, and we started to go on "next left, next right" adventures, to see where we would end up. His name was Harry

Tashman (sic!). I doubt if we ever went more than 2 miles away, Hackney was our universe. As I was growing quite quickly now, the 24" wheels became inadequate - I needed a bigger bike. So dad took me along in 1944 to one of the James Grose cycle shops, in Euston Road. All the bikes on offer were "utility" bikes - no chrome, all black enamel, very inferior quality metal. I was determined to have dropped handlebars (with cable brakes) and so I got my first sports bike. It had 3 gears and cost £12.

By now, I had formed friendships outside the flats, notably Sid Kenton (nee Kirschenbaum) from the Pembury Estate, Larry Lamb (whose father was caretaker at the Electricity Board showroom in Hoxton) and John (who was very soft-spoken, and slightly deaf). We were all energetic cyclists, and started to go out on longer and longer rides, culminating in a notable Southend and back. With a strong westerly wind, we got there in about 2½ hours, spent the day there and left to come home at 6pm. Then we learnt our first lesson about energy conservation. We had very little left, and got home at 11pm, exhausted.