

3. ADMISSION TO MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL 1930

In 1930, just as the Depression had fallen on the world I graduated high school and managed to make it into McGill University, a private college that could accept only a small part of the high school graduating class. Since there was no work to be had one might as well go to college if one could get in. Mike Wisenthal, refused entry to McGill, went to Bishop's college in Sherbrooke, his brother Hymie, a fellow Boy Scout, took work in his father's Stag Shoe Co..

My friend Harold Rosenstein went to New York to seek his fortune, scorning those of us who were wasting four years in college. He was in a hurry. Harold, incidentally, did gain a fortune selling paper boxes, drove a Buick proudly as he showed me New York a very few years after I graduated. He was planning to buy the heavy equipment that would make corrugated boxes. Then he took on a partner who ultimately swindled him, and left him alone in his old age in a dilapidated rent-controlled one-room apartment in New York, consoled only by occasional visits from his younger brother Herb, who had also sought his fortune in New York, and did reasonably well. Their sister Bunny Klein, is still alive and living in Montreal, and I have called her from time to time, though we have recently lost touch.

Beatrice's father similarly took on a partner, against the advice of her mother, and was thoroughly cheated by him. And Phil Hauser, very much a man of the world, his beloved Zelda having predeceased him, sick and blind in his old age, had a highly recommended housekeeper. When I saw him (I think at a meeting of the IUSSP in Florence) and I asked about his housekeeper, he said "She's gone. And she took me for all I had."

One wonders how many of these ghouls are wandering about, seeking credulous men who have some money in the bank. Men with plenty of experience, but who never learned to hang on to their check books. .

But back to my entry into McGill. The college entry exam was uniform for the province, and out of some 900 who wrote I came out number 23. I remember well Kenneth MacClure, who came first in my year, and whom I last saw near the end of the War; He had climbed to a very high rank in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

For myself, I was not entitled to a medal, but was safely above the entrance level set by McGill, higher for Jews than for others. (It shows how fast things have changed that a generation or so later Phil Vineberg, a Jewish lawyer, was appointed Chairman of the McGill Board of Governors. And a few further years and Bernard Shapiro was appointed principal. And things kept changing: the successor to Shapiro is a woman, unimaginable in my day, Heather Munroe-Blum).

Four Friends, McGill 1930-34

At college I chose a concentration in mathematics, in which I had a little ability, enough that I could get through exams with very limited work. Part of the time thus released I spent in visiting other classes-French and English literature, philosophy, history, and genetics--without ever having to face exams in them--God forbid. And the rest of the time saved was spent in social activities, mainly in associations with three others, about each of whom I can say a word here.

One was Morton Bloomfield, living in Westmount, and so of a somewhat better-off family. He concentrated in English, and 40 years later our paths crossed again when I was appointed to Harvard, where Morton had been teaching for some years, He had become an authority on the Seven Deadly Sins, and it was his knowledge of these, gained in the Vatican Library that propelled him up to a professorship at Harvard.

Then there was Isidore Dubin, son of very recent immigrant parents, living on the Rue St. Urbain, an area of first settlement. Dubin was a medical student (heaven only knows what sacrifices his family had to make to pay his tuition), and I once accompanied him to anatomy class. There was a cadaver (a stiff in the student vernacular) laid out on a table on the platform, of a young woman. I did not at the time know the difference between male and female anatomy, and wondered why she lacked some of what I had thought basic parts of the human body.

Dubin was far more worldly than I was, quite apart from anatomy class. He was rich in quotations, many of them limericks, and scatological. One evening Morton was driving us around, and we drove to a brothel. The rest of us were not interested, but Dubin was. He went in, first checking to see that he had the \$2.00 charge.

Dubin liked to try things that other people only think of. One evening when we were all a little tipsy he told us about pissing in the kitchen sink. The way he said it suggested that there was something deeply symbolic there--heaven knows what it was. And on another occasion he said he had heard in chemistry class that a fart is mostly methane, and can be ignited. We were in someone's home, and forthwith the matter was put to experimental test. One of us took down his pants, one got out a cigarette lighter, a fart was produced, but alas it did not ignite.

Notwithstanding his knowledge of women, Dubin made an unhappy marriage.. While still not very old, his wife developed a manic-depressive psychosis, and could be violent. When he visited our home in Chicago's Madison Park many years later he showed us some of the bruises and cuts that resulted from their battles. We knew another such couple, also a small man with a large manic wife. He was the LeNeveu referred to elsewhere in these notes whose wife, beautiful and highly intelligent, in later life could be violent. She was Catholic and he Protestant--could contradictions arising from that have affected Helen LeNeveu?

Dubin's career as a research physician, ran parallel to that of the more eminent Rachmiel Levinne, also from McGill two or three years ahead of us, and of whom we saw a good deal when we stayed in Chicago, including once running across him on Ellis Avenue in front of the University Book Store, where he told me that his wife had just died. He was crushed by the loss.

Finally, there was Jack MacCabe, the one Gentile in our group, probably gay, a biology student, and full of tales of goings on among junior instructors in the biology labs. He had pretensions as a pianist, based on partial mastery of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. After graduation, in disregard of Hitler's rise to power, he went to Germany to continue his piano studies. We never referred to him again.

Years later I was able to trace him through a chance encounter with an official of Imperial Oil, of which his father was also an official, and was informed that Jack had died in Zurich in 1960.

We four used to meet at least once a week, to drink beer, and to talk, talk, talk. We usually drank at the Pig and Whistle Tavern (formally the Prince of Wales) on Stanley Street, just above St. Catherine, then went on to Ben's, famous for smoked meat sandwiches, and finally ended up with coffee at Murray's. .

I remember when I fell on Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, a book with a breathtaking survey of world culture from about 3,000 B.C. to the present. It explored the soul of each epoch through its music, painting, and writing. Spengler found nine cultures to have sprung up through history--Egyptian, Chinese, Greco-Roman, etc., and the West, the greatest and the last. Each has its spring time (the Middle Ages for the West), summer, autumn, and winter. We live in the barren winter of the West. This succession of cultures sprang out of the eternal peasant countryside, and when the last ends we will fall back to the same. Everything that is say able--in music, poetry, and the arts-- will have been said. As somewhere else has been said "Once its riddle has been solved a culture falls into the abyss"

Many of Spengler's assertions have been criticized by other historians, but to me at an impressionable age be made clear what a unified culture--how the West's poetry, music, architecture, all evolved together, in a story that started in the Middle ages and is now coming to an end. "Every culture falls into the abyss once its riddle has been solved." The virtual abandonment of the sense of unstoppable progress that made the 19th century so rosy, was due to the 1914-8 war, in which millions of men with no real differences were organized to kill one another. Wars of religion, wars for booty, wars for slaves, wars to take over provinces for their tax income, as Rome did, but the 1914-8 killings none of these had such understandable, if not commendable, reasons.

All this struck a blow at the Enlightenment. The notions of progress and rationality could no longer stand up after a war in which millions of the West's finest young men slaughtered one another to no purpose. The War and the depression through which we were passing gave credibility to Spengler's thesis of the end of Western civilization. It was a theme that seemed to fit our times and our individual prospects. Especially as evil leaders were heading us towards a new war that would exceed the bloodshed of the last.

While we talked and argued Hitler was haranguing audiences and through the connivance of a doddering Marshal Hindenburg came to power. Spengler was writing his books at this time, and the Nazis thought that they could use him to their purposes if he made certain changes. Spengler, firm in his beliefs as only an upright German can be, refused to change a single word he had written. He was too well-known for the Nazis to touch his person, but they did burn his books.

Such were the themes that concerned us as we drank our beer at the Pig and Whistle

First trip to New York

Morton's family had a car that he was able to borrow for some 10 days in the summer of 1933, and he and Isadore and myself drove the 400 miles to New York. We followed roads that were paved indeed, but narrow and with frequent sharp curves--hardly the superhighways of today I was worried on the way down, having no money a hotel was out of the question, and having nothing that could be called an invitation from my relatives. However my Uncles Harry and Frank said they were glad to see me and put me up and feed me, though their wives showed less enthusiasm. I remember Uncle Harry's daughter Hortense (somewhat younger than myself and recently passed away) very clearly, other cousins rather vaguely.

I got to be friendly with a neighbor of Uncle Harry-I think his name was Michael-no older than I was and very much better read in science. With him I visited the American Museum of Natural History and other worthwhile places. Just cruising on the subway system by myself was thrilling-and affordable, the fare being something like ten cents. I remember seeing Grand Central Station. I stared up at the frieze on the main Post Office: "Not snow, nor heat, nor rain, nor gloom of night keeps these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." Only recently did I learn that those words were from Herodotus written about the messengers traveling the Imperial roads of Persia in the fifth century B.C. I saw many other things in my ten days--altogether New York seemed a magical city.

At the end of ten days we reunited according to plan and drove the 400 miles home. Isadore had the most exciting story to tell. He had been wandering in Harlem late one night, Heaven knows what he expected to find there. What he did find was a holdup-a large Black with a gun, who demanded his money. Isadore was so frightened he filled his pants as he surrendered his purse.

One way or another I followed all three after graduation separated us, so I know that all three have passed away – I am the sole survivor.

Other students whom I knew included Gerald Rickwood, whose father was a church organist, and who himself had an impressive knowledge of music, and Elton Pounder, who was my lab partner. Poor man--I was just not a gifted experimenter, indeed not an experimenter at all. Elton de facto had to do the experiments without much help from me. He followed up and became a researcher in the physics of the Arctic Ocean, if I remember right, remaining always at McGill: I often visited him in his lab in the basement of the McDonald Physics Building, quite possibly the same lab that had been occupied a generation earlier by the great Sir Ernest Rutherford. Rutherford's strength was in proposing what looked trivial experiments making simple devices to carry them out. And then drawing important conclusions from them. He started out at McGill measuring street vibrations from passing streetcars. I am afraid he was too good for McGill, and soon was appointed to the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge.

My college teachers, McGill 1930-4

After my second undergraduate year I retreated from Math and Physics to just Math, thus freeing Elton from my lab partnership.

Among my teachers at McGill I recall Charles T. Sullivan, somewhat diminutive in stature, red faced, who lectured in a dramatically flowing gown. Long-time head of McGill's Department of Mathematics, and with the most perfect copy-book handwriting I have ever seen. When he finished his lecture the black-board was a work of art. Rickwood, an amateur photographer, once took a picture of the board and gave me a copy, which alas I no longer have. I remember one time when Jack MacCabe and I, working with a pair of scissors and paper, discovered that we could make a figure with one side only. We were puzzled by it, and Jack said "Let's show our discovery to Sullivan" That seemed pretty daring, but spurred on by Jack I timidly knocked on the door and we were admitted and showed our finding. Of course Sullivan knew all about it and discoursed on some of the properties of what he called a Mobius ring. But on the whole Sullivan was purely a math teacher, not a mathematician; he would be out of his study watching professional baseball every afternoon of the season. .

In my time Gordon Pall, an algebraist, was just out of graduate school. He was thought to have the makings of future distinction, but then spent all his time working for what he regarded as good causes. David Howat, who taught analytical geometry, went back to his native Scotland while I was a student. When at the end of a class I went up to Howat and told him how wonderfully easy analytical problems were compared with Euclid, with whom I struggled through high school, He said something like "Just don't forget that those problems I solve at the

board are made up to be readily solved by analytical means." I found Howat very approachable and was sorry he was leaving.

W.L.G. Williams was a graduate of the University of Chicago and just about the only research mathematician in the McGill Department (and the only one who lectured without a gown.) He was also a Quaker, and altogether, both as a mathematician and as a person, the most admirable member of the department. I believe he was a descendant of and named after the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. He could have been a grandson, the American Civil War being only about 70 years behind us at the time.

When I was in fourth year I with a few other students was invited to attend a lecture by a visitor on the proof that using only a straight edge and a pair of compasses it was impossible to trisect an arbitrary angle. I could not understand any part of the argument and was pleased when the faculty present asked questions that showed they didn't understand either.

During the two years I was in Physics as well as math I had a course with Arthur S. Eve, in my time pretty decrepit – I believe that he harked back to the glory days of the great Rutherford. I also had a class in statics and dynamics with Professor Reilly. I don't remember how to work out the resultant of a number of forces acting on a point, but I do remember the extraordinary skill in arithmetic he exhibited at the blackboard. He would multiply two six digit numbers in his head, writing down the 12 or so digits of the answer from left to right.

So with nothing to do outside listening to two or so hours of math lectures each day I attended classes that interested me. I remember French literature, English literature with a Professor McBain, of whom I remember only that he kept punctuating his lectures by taking off his glasses and putting them back on. I also took a course in writing with Professor Harold Files. He greatly improved my style by ordering me to delete all expressions I was overly pleased with.

My passion for knowledge--on everything besides mathematics, I admit--went further yet. I wanted badly to have some contact outside of classes with the faculty. I didn't dare to attempt an evening with so exalted a figure as a McGill professor by myself, but did arrange to invite a professor on behalf of a group of fellow students. I remember an evening with Professor McLennan, a philosopher, another with Professor Love, a geneticist. On each occasion I bought a bottle of ginger ale and some biscuits (subsidized by my father) to create a sense of communion, and to avoid any resemblance to a class room we sat on the thick Indian rug in our living room at 3454 Addington while our guest sat on the overstuffed couch.

The high-born Englishman: A.H.S. Gilson, Montreal, 1930-34

Of all my teachers at McGill the most colorful was A.H.S. Gilson, and he is worth a section to himself.

Gilson (known as horse face because of his long jaw) was my instructor in differential equations. A highborn Englishman, graduate of Cambridge, who delighted in tormenting the lower orders, he seemed particularly to pour scorn on us colonials. There was in our class a Samuel Neamtan, hard-working but not brilliant, evidently a recent immigrant from Eastern Europe; sticking pins into Neamtan was to Gilson good sport. Neamtan joined a weather forecasting agency in Winnipeg, and had a moderately successful career.

He survived Gilson's torments, but they certainly did not brighten his undergraduate life. I have tried to reach him in recent years, without success.

Gilson was something of a painter, and when we four undergraduates described elsewhere were cruising about downtown in Montreal late at night, often having coffee at Murray's before breaking up for the evening, we might run into Gilson, once with a huge picture frame slung over his shoulder.

Years later we heard about him again. Harold Greenway, a friend from the Bureau of statistics in which I was working, was entertaining Dean Waynes of the University of Manitoba, at an evening party. That was the institution of which Gilson, leaving McGill, had recently been appointed President. Waynes, a business-like, serious functionary, almost foamed at the mouth when I asked him how he found the new President. He was nearly speechless, but from what he did say Gilson was worse than the Devil himself. He would phone Waynes at 3:00 a.m., pester him then and in the daytime with questions on his administration of the faculty. The President is expected to deal with matters of policy, to see that good people were appointed to senior posts, and then to let the University get on with its work. And above all the President should be busy raising funds for the University -- not dangling faculty on a string and playing with them as a cat plays with a mouse.

Reading ahead the reader will note the resemblance among Haldane, Fisher and Gilson: all high-born Englishmen, all Cambridge-educated, and all taking pleasure in making fun of the lower orders.

My actuarial non-career, Montreal 1934-6

Once I graduated, at a fine ceremony in Loewe's movie theatre on St. Catherine Street, rented by McGill for the occasion, the question was what to do. In the year 1934 there were no easy

answers. I had studied mathematics; should I go on to do graduate work, get a degree and become a professor. I consulted Professor W.L.G. Williams. He was, as I said to myself, a creative mathematician, a Quaker, and a man of great goodwill, especially to his students. He asked simply: "In Canada there is probably one new post in mathematics a year; do you think you are likely to get it?" My answer could only be no. I was unlikely to turn out to be the top candidate in my age class. Especially considering that I had second-class honors, partly due to failing to devote myself to mathematics, but following diverse interests during my four years.

What naturally occurred to me was to use my math to become a life insurance company actuary. In those days there seemed to be no other field in which mathematics could be applied. I had taken the first two or three exams of the Society of Actuaries (then under a different name) while at college. I wrote the remaining exams after I graduated, and earned the title of Associate of the Society. Beyond that was the Fellowship degree that I never tried for.

I was then appointed actuary (and telephone operator-receptionist) of a small start-up company in Montreal. It was grossly underfunded, and when one of its policy-holders died it folded.

I spoke to Mr. Burke, head actuary of the Sun Life, which may have been Canada's largest, with a vast building dominating Dominion Square (built before 1929 and still only partly occupied), and he, well-wishing but with limited budget, could not offer even a distant promise of a job. I entered a competition for a post in the Prudential Life in the U.S, but apparently there were hundreds of applicants, many with far better qualifications than I had.

I especially liked the idea of living in New York. Most of the insurance companies there were mutual, i.e. owned by their policy holders. Since these numbered in the hundreds of thousands for a big company, there was no way they could run the company, so the company was run by its executives, who were mainly actuaries. That made actuarial science a particularly attractive career. I was very disappointed when my application to the Prudential was turned down. My attitude to New York changed drastically, as you will see.

Now that I have gone in another direction, and am in no way beholden to the actuarial profession, it occurs to me how brilliant its public relations have been. Calling the activity "life insurance" was a particularly happy stroke. There is absolutely no sense in which my life is "insured" by a policy. No human agency can insure that I will be alive even tomorrow. If, it does not insure, then what does it do.

A life insurance policy places a bet between myself and a company. I bet that I will die, the company bets I will live. If I die I have won the bet and the company has to pay my family or other beneficiary. If I live I have lost the bet and I continue paying the premium. Stating it this way gives the policy an illicit flavor; it imports some of the aura of betting on the horses, even

though the bet in this case has the laudable aim of protecting my family against my premature death.

The depression and my first job, Ottawa, 1936

In 1936, the country and the world (including myself) were still agonizing in the Depression. Many people did have jobs, of course and were able to hold on to them, but the new entrant was out of luck. Governments and corporations alike were cutting down their staffs to save money, certainly not adding to them.

Keynes diagnosed the trouble as too little money chasing too many goods, and the right approach was not to save, but to spend. I remember something called the Townsend Plan well before Keynes, which amounted to printing money and putting it into the hands of those people who would be sure to spend it--i.e. the poor. But knowledgeable people (sic) kept saying that this would only inflate the currency. It took Keynes to show that the effect of printing money in a situation of plentiful resources and insufficient (money) demand would increase demand without raising prices until all the resources were engaged.

The Roosevelt administration put Keynes into effect, though probably on too small a scale. But then the war came on and it served as a vast public works project that dwarfed any peacetime make-work expenditure.

I had graduated from McGill in 1934, and there seemed little chance of converting my mathematical degree into cash. As said above, I tried actuarial work and failed to establish myself. So I was more than happy to take a job on the 1936 Census of the Prairie Provinces. I came to Ottawa, and settled into a boarding house operated by Mrs. Kronk, the first time I was living under a roof other than that of my parents. My budget was simple: income \$75 per month; expense on room and board \$30; difference \$45, all found. Since my income up to that time at home in Montreal was limited to the occasional quarter that my father slipped me for street car fare this was big money. Much of the difference went into the bank, and after not many months I bought a car, paying part cash, part by a mortgage on the car provided by a friend.

The workplace was the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS) and the clerical staff consisted of men and single women (married women had to stay home during the Depression.) The young people gradually formed themselves into couples--I remember their names to this day: Jimmy Henderson and Ann Shannon, Joe Reynolds and Ruth Rideout, myself and Beatrice Orkin.

The DBS was a sleepy old-fashioned bureaucracy in the 1930s. Under normal economic circumstances I cannot imagine a graduate of a first-class college, with honors in mathematics entering with many thousands of others a national competition for census clerk; the job was at

the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy, and I had only a small probability of getting it. However I did enter, wrote the examination, passed, and was delighted to receive a telegram instructing me to report to Ottawa on July 7, 1936. I still remember the date for from then on I was free of the stuffy neighborhood of Addington Avenue in Montreal, and my family, who, nice people though they (aside from my father) really hadn't joined the world.

When I took up the offered slot in the national census-taking body it did not take long, even with my inexperienced eye, to see that I had entered a tired institution, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS). I was hired to examine the census, consisting of large sheets of paper with a line for each of the persons enumerated and to "correct" errors made by the enumerators, i.e. remove inconsistencies. The census as then visualized did not have to correspond to the situation it pretended to describe, but it had to be consistent with itself. Editing it was dull work, not made any more acceptable by the thought of its futility.

So I relieved the boredom by taking time to compare the occupations reported in the Census for Canada with similar results for the US and the UK. Looking at the tables in published reports of around 1930 I found for example that there were more dentists per thousand persons enumerated in Canada than in the UK, but fewer than in the US. There were other indications that the culture of Canada was intermediate between that of the US and the UK. I wrote these findings up and showed them around, promising results for other occupations as soon as I could get time to turn them out. These got me into trouble.

By chance one of them fell into the hands of my supervisor, Alan LeNeveu, who was enraged. I was not doing the work I was hired to do, thus breaking the line of command. He summoned me to his office, where I found him, red-faced, trembling with anger. He was going right upstairs to the top boss, Dr. R. H. to tell him what I had done, how I had broken out of line.