

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Gentrification of a Jew (1910-1929)**

My father was born in the East End of London, a younger son of a large and far-flung Jewish family. His father came to Britain, then a haven of liberalism, from the Czarist Empire in the mid-19th century to escape conscription into a pork-eating army. An uncle had emigrated to Australia and an aunt to South Africa. There were relatives in Aberdeen who spoke English with a Scottish burr and in Merthyr Tydfil with the Welsh sing-song; and others in France and Germany. But as a child I never heard of contacts being kept up with "the old country". Perhaps this was because Dad, as a second generation Englishman, wanted to be as British as he could within the limits of Judaism. He referred with good-natured contempt to more recent arrivals from Europe who spoke English with an accent as "greeners".

Dad went to the Jews' Free School at the bottom of Petticoat Lane. He left school at fourteen to serve his apprenticeship in the largely Jewish fur trade. He quickly became a skilled cutter and nailer, had his own business by the time he was eighteen, and earned a thousand pounds a year when he was twenty-five. That was a sizable income in those days, when the pound was real money, not small change. He did 10,000 pounds' worth of business a year with Debenhams, one of London's biggest department stores; was given government contracts to supply sheepskin coats for British soldiers fighting on the Russian front in World War I. But he went bankrupt in the depression of 1921. In a society which measured success largely in terms of money his financial failure undermined his self-respect and spoiled his relations with my mother.

When they married in 1907 Dad was quite a catch. He was twenty-nine, prospering,

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

good-looking, had a lively personality, and, like my mother, a good voice. He also had a sense of humour - albeit a bit vulgar, which in later years often made mother say: "Hymie, not in front of the children!" At that time I understood as little of his bawdy music hall songs as of the Hebrew psalms he sang with gusto in synagogue. On a more elevated level Dad performed in amateur Gilbert and Sullivan operas and loved to entertain the family with his favourite, "I am the very model of a modern Major-General, I've information animal and vegetable and mineral." His fondness of such tongue-twisters was a feat for the son of a poor immigrant. The pleasure he gained from it must have lain partly in proving himself an Englishman, although he made no effort to pass himself off as a toff. His anti-snobism came out in his attitude to an elder sister. She had married well and gone up in the world, put on airs and adopted a refined accent. Dad nicknamed her "the Duchess". When I was very young he would sometimes take me on a Sunday to the market in Petticoat Lane, where we both delighted in the spell-binding spiels of the cockney salesmen, peddling their cut-rate wares. Then we would lunch on a salt-beef sandwich at Barnet's the kosher butchers, and finish the day with a walk past his alma mater, the Jews' Free School at the bottom of the Lane and head for Puma Court. This alley, with its old-fashioned gas lampposts and worn flagstone paving, was a scene from Dickens. Walking past a dairy, Dad would point to a dingy second floor window and tell me with a mixture of pride and nostalgia: "That's the room where I was born" - and after a meaningful pause would pronounce with a satisfied smile: "and so was the Duchess".

Mother was born in 1885. She was a beauty, with wavy black auburn-flecked hair and the rounded curves which were fashionable in her times. She married at 22, in 1907, though this barely slowed the flood of gentlemanly "admirers" who sought out her company until her premature death at 56. She had three children, but with servants and nurses to look after us, she occupied much of her life with other people's problems.

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

My mother was warm hearted, impulsive and full of energy. She tended to run things for her family, and arranged the marriages of her brother and sisters. She was also engaged in charity work, especially after World War I broke out in 1914. Every Sunday our three-storey house in Stamford Hill, north London, would be overflowing with blue-uniformed wounded Jewish soldiers, some with arms in slings, some on crutches. (With more childish curiosity than tact I would sometimes ask: "Where's your other leg?") In the usually quiet street would be parked a string of cars - a rarity in those days before the horse was extinct - waiting to take the soldiers for a drive in the still unspoiled countryside. Then they would come back for a bang-up high tea.

Besides being beautiful and energetic, mother was ambitious. After the war ended, she focused her attention on setting up a retail dress and fur business. Her first shop was on Stamford Hill. She soon moved up to Oxford Street in the West End and from there, step by step, to Bond Street, then the pinnacle of fashion. Her clientele included one or more of the Prince of Wales' mistresses. But mother was a charismatic saleswoman, not a hard-headed business woman. In the crash of 1929 she too went bankrupt.

When she had money, however, she enjoyed spending it. She took up golf then a high class sport, went riding on Rotten Row in Hyde Park and even bought and drove a two-seater car - very daring for a woman in those days (about 1918). Her love of the pleasures of life made her put on weight, to which she was naturally inclined and she went in for Turkish baths, massage and dieting. It was a losing battle and her curves became rounder as the years rolled by. But she never lost her looks or her spirit. She took singing lessons, and was a voracious reader, always eager to enrich her limited education, cut short at the age of fourteen. After going bankrupt she passed a course in dietetics, massage and related health treatment and with the help of an admirer set up a "Food Reform Guest House" in Yorkshire, serving raw carrots and nut

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN  
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

cutlets to overweight ladies. She herself generally adhered to this spartan diet, so different from the heavy, oily Jewish cooking on which she had been brought up. But once in a while, she confessed to me, she simply had to nip out secretly for steak and chips.

My early childhood was happily spent in our three-storey outer London house, whose front wall was covered with blue morning glory. The neighbourhood, Stamford Hill, was the first step up for the children of Jewish immigrants, like my parents, who demonstrated their upward mobility by leaving the East End.

Somehow, between our mother's ambitious dynamism and our father's kindly character, easy-going in everything but religion, my older sister Vera, my younger brother Maurice and I, were brought up in an affectionate, supportive household. We ate kosher, studied Hebrew, and attended synagogue every Saturday. Each Wednesday, our Danish nurse took us to the local cinema to see silent films starring Charlie Chaplin or Mary Pickford. On Sundays, we paid our weekly visit to our mother's mother, Sarah Silverhamer, the only one of our four grandparents who lived long enough for us to know well. She was a polyglot who, I suspect, spoke no language correctly. She knew Polish, Yiddish and some German as well as English. But when my brother and I were old enough to twit her over her atrocious English grammar and pronunciation she indignantly excused herself saying: "Vell, vodya expect'. I've only been in Enklan' 40 years." Grandma believed, as grandmas do, that her job was not to discipline but to spoil us, which she did mainly by overfeeding us with her delicious but fattening Jewish cooking. She came to England about 1880 from somewhere in Galicia, in south-east Poland, probably from a small country town, for she kept chickens in the backyard right in Stoke Newington, North London.

About 1916, when I was six, my urban childhood was interrupted by a couple of years in the lovely countryside of Surrey. The air-raids over London were becoming a menace and we

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

moved to Dorking, then an unspoilt country town 30 miles Southwest of London. Upon arriving Mother decided (she was always the one to decide and Dad, reluctantly, to agree) that we three children should go to boarding school. (What could be more British?) The Stamford Hill school, because of the air-raids, had moved to Stoke, just outside Guildford. Housed in a rambling old rectory, said to be 250 years old, the school was set in several acres of grounds. It was there in Surrey, amidst the bluebells and horse-chestnut trees, with dragonflies skimming the surface of the ponds, that I began my lifelong love affair with the English countryside.

Shortly after the war ended, we moved to Hampstead, which would have been a far more fashionable neighbourhood but for the fact that so many other people of a background similar to ours were moving there too. Still, it was a step up in the world, a step further from our family's East End origins. There were even tennis courts in the communal gardens enclosed by every four streets. Maurice and I played incessantly, and from the age of ten, tennis became an important part of my lives. Through tennis we children met our neighbours (though our parents mixed very little). They were business or professional people, Jewish and gentile, and we kids got along well in the camaraderie of the courts. But there was one exception. A few doors away lived Pamela, a peaches and cream, blonde British beauty who, in her late teens, was "Presented at Court". This impressed us small fry; but Pamela was not impressed by us and she told the gentile kids: "Don't play with them. They're Jews". They took no notice.

Our family's assimilation was aided by the fact that Mother's birthday was on Christmas Day. This gave us a good excuse to take part in the joyful exchanging of gifts, hanging up stockings kissing under the mistletoe, eating pudding laced with silver sixpences. Dad had his reservations about these pagan practices but he couldn't resist turning out the lights when the pudding came in, dousing it with whisky, setting it alight, dipping a finger in the flame and letting it burn there with its blue alcoholic light. He balanced this heathenism against chanukah, the

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN  
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

Jewish winter solstice festival of lights, linked with the struggle of the Maccabees against the Syrian empire. The lighting of the chanukah candles, eight evenings in a row, around Christmas time must, in his mind have served the purpose of exorcising the god of the gentiles.

In those lush years of the early 20's we had a governess and two or three servants, usually Irish girls. Maurice and I mimicked their brogue but loved them. And Mother threw parties, especially while Vera was growing to an interesting and interested age. Mother herself loved dancing and insisted on having a parquet floor built in the drawing room, which Dad considered another of her extravagances. But such expenditures didn't worry him until after his bankruptcy.

The first school I went to in Hampstead, at the age of eight, was University College Prep School on Holly Hill, a lovely old part of Hampstead up near the Heath, where Karl Marx had taken his family for Sunday walks and picnics. Dad also took us for walks to the Heath. On Bank Holidays we went there for the fun of the fair, boat-swings and roundabouts and coconut shies, at which he was a dab hand. But he never talked about Marx. Our parents raised us to emulate other Jewish role models, only one of whom was associated with money - Rothschild. Dad once told me approvingly that a certain member of the banking family was asked if he was fond of music. He jingled the gold coins in his trouser pocket and answered: "That is the music I like best". The story is too crude to be true, but it was meant to spur my ambitions. So was my parent's praise of other great Jews, from Spinoza and Disraeli (both of whom, to differing degrees, repudiated Judaism) to Rufus Isaacs, who as Lord Reading became Lord Chief Justice, and later, Viceroy of India. Jesus and Karl Marx were not on the list, but many Jews, famous for scholarship, wealth, philanthropy or a title were held up to me as examples of the heights to which I might aspire.

## **Cheltenham: 1920-1925**

Mother and father had both left the Jew's Free School in the East End of London at the age of fourteen. They wanted their three children to receive a better education than they had, although they differed on how to achieve this. Even before I turned ten, mother was speaking longingly of my some day going to Oxford. Dad, with his healthy contempt for snobbery, viewed this as one more of mother's extravagances, especially since it meant that first Maurice and I would have to go to prep school, then to "public" (i.e. private) school. Eventually he bowed to mother's wish on one condition: wherever we went to boarding school there had to be kosher meat and an observance of other Jewish rituals.

Only two English public schools made such options available to its students. One was Cheltenham College. Younger students prepared for the college at a nearby prep school called Glenmuir. Glenmuir provided its Jewish students, who composed about ten percent of its student body, with kosher meals. Both mother and dad were satisfied, and in 1920, when I was ten and Maurice eight, we were sent off to Cheltenham.

Cheltenham is a spa in the west of England, one of the most conservative towns in the country and a favourite place of retirement for peppery Indian Army colonels nursing their gout in glorious gardens of tulips. Glenmuir Prep School was a rambling old house set on the edge of a great green sports field, where we played soccer, field hockey and cricket. Sport was an important part of the curriculum. In fact being a "swot" or book-worm was quite contemptible. The school administration, inadvertently, did a good job curtailing the cultivation of such objects of ridicule, by imposing on us a curriculum that was uniformly dull and irrelevant. French and Latin were not taught as if they were or ever had been means of communication, but as conglomerations of cases, genders, tenses, irregular verbs and parts of speech, to be remembered

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

and recited. Geography consisted largely of memorising the names of the counties, county towns and the rivers on which they were situated - of course, only of England. There were passing references to the fact that other countries of the United Kingdom, such as Scotland and Wales, also had counties but we didn't bother much with them. As to the rest of the world, the main thing was to observe how much of the map was coloured red - not, of course, for communism but, strangely enough, for the British Empire, which was rather larger then than now. Poetry was merely a matter of metre and rhyme scheme; all form and no content.

Our sex education was similarly circumspect. At the age of twelve or thirteen we were called in to the headmaster's study one or two at a time, presumably on the matron's estimate of how close we were to puberty. There was excited whispering when the time came for these secret sessions, but they turned out to be anti-climatic: a lot of stuff about birds, bees and flowers which were at no point related to human beings. More interesting were strange stories of wet dreams passed around by the more precocious boys, who explained that they had nothing to do with bed-wetting in fact they were quite delightful. And big boys at public school, it was rumoured, brought them on with the aid of pillows, which ended up rather messy. When I myself reached public school I had my own first wet dream, after peering at night at a girl undressing in a nearby house. Shortly afterwards the housemaster called several of us in to listen to a tirade against "the filthy habit of self-abuse". This he said would ruin our health and might well drive us mad. We should pay more attention to sport and take cold baths.

Not surprisingly, at Glenmuir I acquired certain habits of self-discipline, even toilet training! Between breakfast and the first morning class was playtime, especially delightful in winter. The head would pour buckets of water on the path, which would freeze overnight into a glassy slide for us to whizz along, after running to gather momentum. But before going out to play one had to pass the boy on duty at the door who would ask: "Have you been?" "Yes".



**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

"To-day?" "Yes, to-day" or its indistinguishable homonym "Yesterday". The British penchant for punning was instilled early, even in connexion with bowel movements. As to more serious sport, I was no great athlete but a good average and before leaving was awarded my cricket colours. Sports training included skill, toughening and being a good loser. After I was beaten in a school boxing tournament by an older boy considerably taller than, I, the headmaster regarded my plucky performance as worthy of mention in my final report.

In spite of doing well in my studies and not being above average in sport I had a happy time at Glenmuir, though the Spartan regime of a British boarding school contrasted with the coddling, especially of an eldest son, in a Jewish family. The other Jewish boys at the school were an unusual lot, mostly wealthy and from the Far or Middle East, South Africa and other parts of the British Empire. Our religion forced us to become a collective. We ate our kosher meat together at a separate table and I still recall my first sight and smell of bacon at the other tables. It struck me then as sickening stuff. Of course, on Sunday we did not go to church; that was the day we wrote our weekly letter home. But it was Saturday which turned us into a clan. On that day, and on important Jewish holidays, the head of the Jewish house at Cheltenham College would come and conduct a religious service and give lessons in the history of the Jewish people. The only display of overt anti-Semitism at Glenmuir, I can recall was one occasion when the head upbraided the Jewish boys as a group, but not in public, calling us "you people", meaning "you wretched or disgusting people", but I have no idea now what it was about. Despite an absence of open persecution, being Jewish in an English public school at the time was, as George Orwell, in his essay "Anti-Semitism in Britain" wrote, "an initial disability comparable to a stammer or a birthmark".

Our weekly letters home did not evoke feelings of homesickness in either Maurice or me. We were happy enough to have mother come down to Cheltenham for the half-term holidays,

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

though we went in terror of her kissing us in front of other boys. The kissing phobia first emerged when we were seen off at London's Paddington Station at the beginning of term, Jewish mothers seeming to be more demonstrative than others. Returning home at the end of term was different. It afforded an opportunity to display our manliness. Regulations required us, for the journey, to wear those high, stiff Eton collars. For the journey we smuggled detachable soft collars which replaced the stiff ones as soon as the train steamed out of Cheltenham station. But by the time we reached the age of twelve or thirteen that was not enough for the tough types. They smoked if they could lay their hands on some fags; if not they would simply roll up newspaper into fat, hollow "cigars". I tried that once and have never been much of a smoker since.

Shortly before leaving Glenmuir I reached a milestone in my youthful career: at the age of 13, I had my barmitzvah, or Jewish initiation into manhood. For months I studied how to chant in Hebrew with my breaking voice that portion of the five books of Moses which I would have to perform on the platform in the synagogue, all dressed up and wearing a bowler hat. My Hebrew teacher was a relative so religious, or at least so ritualistic, that he would not even bear the burden of a handkerchief on the Sabbath but wore it as a garment tied round his wrist. The day after the torture of the chanting and the bowler hat my parents hosted a reception. The whole house swarmed with relatives and friends. Small tables were piled with refreshments: smoked salmon and chopped herring sandwiches and a great silver bowls of claret cup with cucumber skins floating in it. On the big mahogany dining-room table, lengthened with all its extra leaves, were the presents to the "barmitzvah boy". Mother, herself a great letter writer, insisted that I write a note of thanks to every donor. There must have been a hundred at least. The task made me wonder whether I really needed so many pairs of opera glasses (which I furtively used at night to peer at girls undressing across the street) and Maeterlinck's Life of the

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

Bees and Matthew Arnold's poems. Far more relevant, I thought at the time, were the cheques, amounting to over a hundred guineas. This sum, I discovered to my chagrin, was later spent by my parents to cover prosaic household expenses when they were less well-off.

At Glenmuir the ultimate aim of our education was teaching us to pass the Common Entrance Exam for entering public school, which in my case meant Cheltenham College. When I entered the college in 1923, at the age of 13, a high proportion of its graduates went on to the elitist military academies of Woolwich and Sandhurst. Few places could have been further from the dreams of my parents, born in the East End of London of Russian-Polish-Jewish immigrant origin. My parents held up to me as a role model Rufus Daniel Isaacs, who rose from cabin-boy to Viceroy of India at the very time that I was at Cheltenham. Despite this encouraging example, like many boys, I found the transition from prep school to college difficult. The transition was worsened when I wound up the first term as one of the few boys not to "go up." This had the absurd result that next term I came top of the class and won a prize. We were allowed to choose the book we wished from a long list and my choice reflected my adolescent ideology. It was a sentimental story of the French Revolution from a strongly pro-royalist and anti-revolutionary standpoint.

My academic endeavours were encouraged by teachers considerably more impressive those at Glenmuir. My Latin and French masters built for me a foundation in linguistics which I later came to greatly appreciate. And a Scotsman called Paterson who taught us Shakespeare. He cleverly chose to teach us first a play to delight teen-aged boys - Henry IV Part I. He adored the English language, which he pronounced with a strong Scottish burr, and taught me to love his subject. I later augmented my school courses with serious reading of my own. Encouraged by my mother, I spent vacations and spare time pondering Ibsen, Shaw, Kipling and Dostoevsky.

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

Other teachers taught me to hate their subjects. I had got by in mathematics while at Glenmuir, but my teacher at Cheltenham turned me off the subject by hurling chalk at us whenever we gave a wrong answer. Worst of all was Major Seaton, who taught drawing, at which I was and still am subnormal. One day the class was set the task of drawing a cube, placed in the middle of the circle of boys. Making the rounds he came to me, saw my miserable effort, clutched a handful of my then thick, black, wavy hair and shouted: "You woolly-headed niggah!" - knowing that I was a Jew.

Anti-Semitism was in the air during my two years at Cheltenham College and the Jewish boarding house was in process of being phased out. There were half a dozen boarding houses altogether, with fifty or sixty boys in each. The gossip surrounding the demise of the Jewish house was that its housemaster, Daniel Lipson, ran the house on such efficient business lines that he prospered, and bought himself an intolerably ostentatious car - a Daimler. Whatever the truth of the matter the Board of Directors let it be known that Jews, for all their money, were no longer welcome and the Jewish house must be done away with. Jewish pupils like myself already at Cheltenham College, however, were allowed to stay on under special arrangements, nominally as Day Boys, actually boarding with families or in Private Boarding Houses (P.B.H.) run by non-Jewish masters and housing four or five boys each. As a result, I lived in three places during my two years at college.

In a closed society where bookworms were despised and athletes admired, the Jews' only way of winning grudging acceptance was through excelling in sport. The Jewish boys, however, came from a background in which learning was seen as the road to success. We were not outstanding in barbarous rugby or gentlemanly, white-flannelled cricket; I fell well below the good average standing I had enjoyed for such sports at Glenmuir. The one field in which we felt we could compete was running - especially in the early '20s when we had a role model in the

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

internationally known runner Abrahams, whose fame was later chronicled in the film "Chariots of Fire". At Cheltenham the champion long-distance runner and winner of the gruelling six and a half mile cross country run was a South African Jew, Singer. So Jewish boys, egged on by Singer who was a prefect, sought social salvation through running.

Every morning, during the long break, all the boys in the school lined up by boarding houses and ran in formation round the perimeter of the big playing field, a distance of over a mile. Singer set a stiff pace which we all, big boys and small, had to keep up. There was a strong element of ethnic pride involved in trying to show that the Jewish house as a whole, not just a couple of champions, could hold up its head in this field at least. But for us smaller boys it was tough. We gasped and wheezed, our sides ached, our heads burst, our hearts throbbed, but we stayed the pace. We had to. Looking back I think that running, or at least the tempering of the will-power that went with it, was one of my main gains at Cheltenham.

Although I ran in their midst each morning, I somehow did not want to acknowledge, in these surroundings at least, that this was my tribe. When mother came down to visit, one sports day, I wondered whether her voluptuous Edwardian curves and wavy black, auburn-flecked hair would be seen as Jewish-looking. But my fears were overcome by the boys' admiring glances at my sister Vera in her flowered chiffon dress.

In general my time at Cheltenham College was considerably less happy than my years at Glenmuir. My insecurity at the College could only partly be blamed on the rising anti-Semitism, the realization that no matter how much I loved England not all of England loved me. The rest of my discomfort stemmed from my increasing intellectual maturity--developed more from my independent reading than the College curriculum. As I became more aware of what it was all about, I became less satisfied with where I was. I felt no sorrow when my career at

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

Cheltenham was brought to an abrupt and premature end by my parents' financial difficulties.

**London, Paris and Leipzig (1925-28)**

Dad never staged a real comeback from his bankruptcy. Somehow he coasted along, setting up a workshop in the basement of the Hampstead house. Here he practised the skills he had mastered as an apprentice in the East End, cutting and stretching skins. He'd probably have lived a happier life as a craftsman than a businessman. Mother was not doing too badly in her fashionable dress business but she was a personable saleswoman rather than a businesswoman. Her financial affairs were in a constant muddle and she could not manage, unaided to meet the steep tuition fees. It must have been a blow to her ambition to turn me into a "real English gentleman", educated first at a "pukka" public school and then going on to Oxford. Dad had no doubt thought all along that a business career was a more practical plan; in any case, to his mind, it was now necessary. So he pulled me out of Cheltenham and fixed me up with a job with a prosperous relative, Phil Milton, ne Moses, husband of the Duchess.

At one time Dad had given a leg up to Uncle Phil, who in his youth had been poor and courted the Duchess on a "penny-farthing" bicycle, with a big front wheel and a small rear one. Now Dad was broke and Phil was rich, with a thriving business in the City, importing hosiery from North Carolina. He owed his start to my father, and agreed to give me a job in his office. Big and bluff, Phil was far from sentimental, but he came to our family's rescue, and started me off at thirty shillings a week.

The job was boring, mostly sorting boxes of ladies stockings according to sizes and colours with exotic names: peach, flesh, nude, apricot. But Uncle Phil, considering that I might

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

be capable of more complex tasks paid for me to have typing lessons, re-assuring me with the words: "I'm not going to make you a typewriter. Some day you may even become a salesman".

Education of a different type came during lunch hour. I bought a battered Baedeker guide-book of London and explored the surrounding area with its ancient streets. Somehow, despite the anti-intellectualism and contempt for bookworms of the British public school system, to which I had been briefly subjected, I wanted to appear as a well-read person. Every week I spent two of my thirty shillings pay on a paperback volume of Bernard Shaw. A few years earlier I had enjoyed without understanding his Pleasant Plays. Now I waded through Man and Superman and Back to Methusaleh, prefaces and all, with their expositions of the life force and evolution, without realising that they were setting me on a course to atheism. Years later I learnt that Shaw once said: "Marx made a man of me". I might immodestly say: "Shaw made a man of me", not only on a socio-political level. He also enhanced the sense of humour inherited from my father, which throughout my life has served as a protection against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

My personal development was soon overshadowed by the General Strike of 1926. The stoppage of public transport did not keep Uncle Phil from the office. He went there in his Daimler, driven by his chauffeur, who was not the sort to go on strike; he displayed a large hand-painted sign inscribed "Milton and Co", which was intended to impress the pickets. Whether it impressed them or not it impressed me, for I rode proudly in the front seat right behind it.

Meanwhile I sympathized with the scabs, particularly with the upper class college boys who blacklegged on the busses and the underground. There they were, only a few years older than I, driving trains or acting as guards. I implored my mother to let me go and "do my bit", but she was not one to endanger her darling boy's life.

Not long after, my job in the City came to an end because hard-headed Uncle Phil wanted

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

me to work on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. Dad was outraged and mother, I suspect, seized on the row as a way of getting me out of business and back to school. It was not such a prestigious place as Cheltenham but the more plebian London Polytechnic, where I could be a day pupil. Its matriculation diploma would at least qualify me to go on to university, even though there seemed little hope of my family being able to pay for it.

I was not sorry to leave the stockings and even the allure of Annie. My weekly purchases of Shaw paperbacks and lunchtime explorations of the City had enhanced my love of learning.

This new type of schooling was very different from that at Cheltenham. For one thing there was no organized sport, which had been such an important part of the curriculum there. There was none of that lung-straining running, and when I returned home each afternoon I was pampered with afternoon tea of wafer-thin brown bread and strawberry jam served by a boisterous Irish maid.

Bankruptcy, in my family's case, did not mean poverty. My mother even hired a "Mademoiselle" to give private French lessons to my sister and myself. I led a life of comfort if not of luxury even though this was a period of constant bickering between my extravagant mother and frugal father. But it gradually became clear that the big three-storey house, with its staff of servants was more than the family could maintain, even though Mother was still solvent. So we took in lodgers, or "paying guests" as they were more delicately referred to, and this helped pay the mortgage and taxes.

They were a pleasant and interesting assortment, mostly Jews, who had replied to our advertisement in The Jewish Chronicle, which assured them of desirable accommodation and kosher food. One couple belonged to a lesser branch of a well-known Iraqi-Indian merchant



**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

family. The pretty young wife was evidently hoping for a divorce from her plump and grumpy middle-aged husband and Mother one day warned me against allowing the wife to make advances to me, apparently fearing that I might be cited as a co-respondent. The warning puzzled me. I was about sixteen at the time. How could I possibly fall for an old woman of twenty-four? Then there was Latvian-bom Miss Perlstein, secretary to the head of the World Zionist Organization. It was probably under her influence that, for one year when I was about seventeen, I became a Zionist. Eager to support the "National Homeland," I acquired a little blue Jewish National Fund money-box to collect for the cause - the first cause I ever embraced - and rattled it at visitors for contributions. At this age, while starting to question the rationality of Jewish religious ritual (mumbling my prayers in Hebrew which I could read but not understand), I was not prepared to abandon Judaism. I merely moved away from ritualism towards ethnicity. I gloried in Israel's past, especially the Macabees' fight for liberation from the Syrian empire, which we celebrated at chanukah; and cherished illusions of Palestine as a solution to "the Jewish problem". Miss Perlstein was a polyglot intellectual. She encouraged me in my adolescent ambition to become a journalist, and gave me books by Chekhov and Tolstoy, Heine and Ibsen, which I read with more enjoyment than understanding.

Lodgers like Miss Perlstein broadened my horizons, and finally weaned me away from penny-dreadfuls printed on cheap newsprint and from two big illustrated volumes on glossy paper entitled Deeds that Thrilled the Empire. They were all about winning Victoria Crosses in World War I, laced with atrocity stories about the horrible Huns. The voracious reading of adolescence and endless hours on the tennis court diverted my attention from our deteriorating economic circumstances, my parents' bickering over money matters and Dad's gradual loss of self-confidence. My post-Cheltenham years were a happy time, with little room for such morbid considerations.

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN  
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

After a year of this urban idyll the time came for me to sit the London University Matriculation exam. I wrote reams for my favourite subjects, English and history, coping confidently enough in French and Latin and sweating over maths with their abominable algebraic symbols and ludicrous logarithms. A few weeks later I journeyed to some ominous grey building in Kensington where the results were posted. It was early in August, 1927, just before my seventeenth birthday. I had passed and my parents were proud of my matriculation. Still, I was scarcely closer to Oxford. As some form of consolation, my mother swapped sons temporarily with a "good Jewish family" in Paris, where I fell in love twice: first with the city itself, later with Jackie, the first American girl I ever knew. At the same time the French son I was swapped for fell in love with my sister Vera.

The Landaus' had an elegant flat in the fashionable district of Passy, where I was given the modernistically furnished room of their son. They served the most delicious meals, a blend of French cuisine and that of the Middle East, where their family originated. I had never lived in such style. I took language lessons from a teacher at the local Lycée who, with the help of French literature, soon brought to life all the grammar that had been drilled into me at Cheltenham.

My host and hostess made a point of being more French than the French. They struck me, at seventeen, as a rather dour couple, and my behaviour did little to cheer them up. The husband suffered from insomnia. One night I returned home without my key at three o'clock in the morning and was forced to ring the door-bell loudly and wake him. That was the end of our relationship.

Arrangements were soon made between our two families for me to move to the home of two elderly sisters; one a widow, the other a spinster. They were just as Jewish and just as

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

French as the Landau's, though they came from the south of France, not the Middle East. The location of their flat, in an early 19th century Parisian tenement, was less elegant but more central than the Landau's - right on the Rue Saint Lazare. This was the same charming Paris of the 1920's which Ernest Hemingway described in A Moveable Feast. I particularly loved the Ile Saint Louis. Just by stepping over an old stone bridge one could enter the Middle Ages. Far from the honking of taxi horns, I would stroll amidst ancient buildings, then sit and read Balzac's short stories. The two old ladies I lived with encouraged me in my quest for culture. They had a subscription for the weekly matinees at the Comédie Française and one or the other often gave me her ticket for the plays of Moliere, Racine or Corneille.

Of course I went to the museums, such as Cluny, where I was horrified by the exhibit of a chastity belt. This helped me for the first time to understand the saying "Love laughs at locksmiths", which I had previously thought referred to opening wooden doors. But most of all I went to the Louvre, dutifully pausing in front of the Mona Lisa, whose smile was too enigmatic to mean much to me. At the time I preferred more accessible paintings, like Rembrandt's portraits of aged Jews of the Amsterdam ghetto posing as biblical characters.

My mother had also arranged a job for me during my eight months in Paris, earning a pocket money salary working for a furrier as a volontaire. My job consisted mostly of counting skins and stitching them together in bundles. It was not arduous work and, being a Jewish firm, we got Saturday as well as Sunday off. This left me with plenty of time to fall in love.

Jackie was a brunette, petite but voluptuous. She was the first American girl I met and she spoke in a seductive, melodious voice which, with my snobbish British upbringing, I had thought no American could possess. To me Jackie's voice was music, and so was everything else about her. She was 18, a year older than I, and studying at a French school for her baccalaureate.

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN**  
**(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

She was a serious student who rather overawed me with her learning. But still she charmed me. She and her sophisticated brother Andy would show me round the Louvre, and I remember Andy coolly confronting the naked Venus de Milo, then taking me round the back of the statue to examine the finer points of her rumps which he said were famous for their beauty. I had never thought of bottoms as being beautiful but did my best to admire them like a connoisseur. In my heart I thought Jackie more beautiful than Venus but our relationship remained purely platonic. I adored her shyly, and we never did more than walk arm-in-arm beside the Seine. (Five years later, in New York, where I was a college student, we enjoyed each other in a less platonic way).

When the time came for me to leave Paris, my mother arrived to escort me home. I had assured her that I was quite capable of managing the journey by myself. But with her romantic nature she was too fascinated by Paris to lose the chance to visit it, and I could hardly blame her.

Back in London, my mother had secured the next stepping stone in what she hoped would be my long march to big money. It was a job in New York with another furrier, a former business associate of my father's. I applied at the U.S. consulate in London for permission to emigrate. The racist quota system worked in my favour, Britons and other north Europeans being placed at the top of the list. Nonetheless, I expected to have to wait many months, perhaps over a year, for my turn to come round.

Since I had done fairly well at French it was decided that I should have a crack at German and go to Leipzig, where my Parisian employer, Bernstein had a brother in the fur business. This would continue my painless apprenticeship with friends of the family. On the way to Leipzig from the Hook of Holland I had to change trains at Hanover which allowed a few hours for sight-seeing in the homeland of both the British royal family and the Pied Piper. Guidebook in hand I trudged round the city until I was tired and hungry and went into a café. I couldn't speak a word of German but the waiter intelligently guessed that I was English, and brought me

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN  
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

just the right dish for a hungry young Englishman - a big plate of ham and eggs. I had never tasted ham before. But thanks to my budding atheism, nurtured by Bernard Shaw, I did not waver. The ham went down a treat and with it went the vestiges of my Judaism, which had been more a matter of dietary laws than theology.

Not, of course, in the home of the Jewish family I stayed with in Leipzig. I was not there long enough to find out much about that historic city, long the home of Bach; for my time was spent on the Brühl, centre of the Jewish dominated fur trade in the company of my fellow apprentices. They seemed pre-occupied with chess, as well as learning English from me rather than teaching me furs and German.

I was summoned back to London quite suddenly, my name having come up on the immigrant quota list unexpectedly early. Once home, I prepared to emigrate and make my way in the fur business, reading a book defending the trade that a family friend had lent me. Its message was that hunting and trapping animals for their fur was not cruel. In fact it might almost be considered merciful. Nature was cruel, "red in tooth and claw", so furriers could set their minds at rest as they raked in the shekels. I was not quite convinced, but the prospect of travel, wealth and launching out on my own subdued my conscience, and I set sail in high spirits.