

FLICKERBOOK

An autobiography

Leila Berg

Ceditions

To P. (D)
for his love, for his help,
and for all the things I have learned from him

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Flip-books, or flicker-books . . . a series of sequential pictures or photographs put on separate pieces of paper, one after the other. When the book was flipped quickly through, the pictures would provide the illusion of a moving picture.

– *Easy-to-make Old-fashioned Toys*, E. F. and A. B. Provenzo (Dover)

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Introduction

by Ruth Fainlight

Leila Berg is three years old at the start of this compelling autobiography of a Jewish girl growing up in Salford in the years between the first and second world wars. She is too young to articulate her own reactions and feelings, but she is entirely aware of them, and also those of the people around her; her bafflement at the words they use to describe their emotions, as well as the subjects they talk about, is conveyed so effectively that one does not know whether to laugh or cry. What especially concerns and puzzles her is the contrast between Jews – herself – and other people, and how to define it. Everything is an indicator although she cannot tell what the difference is. Even the shape of a loaf of bread seems significant. She is extremely intelligent, and wants to know and understand the whole world. She is also strong-willed, with an unshakeable sense of her own identity. And she is sensual: she loves colours and textures, sounds and smells; she is highly-sexed: the explanation of a little girl's technique for falling asleep is one that is rarely presented in a childhood memoir: 'There are two ways to go to sleep . . . The second way is to stroke and rub and twist the place between my legs. It is a beautiful feeling, as if I've come home, like home is in stories . . . And then I'm asleep.'

One of the first things that happen when she starts school is that: ' . . . two boys got hold of me in the playground and banged my head against the wall over and over, and said "Why did you kill Jesus?" I don't know who they thought I was. My head hurts.' She ponders what she sees on the street: 'Outside the church in Montague Street there's a man nailed to a cross. We're not supposed to see it because we're Jewish but I can't not see anything.'

It says outside the church that God gave his very own son to be nailed on the cross because he loved him. And it says he gave him to the world to nail on the cross because he loved the world. How could God do such dreadful things?’

As she grew up, Leila Berg took advantage of every cultural possibility available in Salford and Manchester: music lessons, bookshops, libraries and museums. She walked to school to save the bus and tram fares to buy second-hand books and tickets to films, theatres and concerts. ‘I am writing all the time. Prose, and poetry,’ she notes, and: ‘I’m spending every minute now translating Greek poetry and Latin poetry into English verse.’ ‘Strange what fun sonnets are to write. I mean generally I hate having to follow rules. But with some things it’s really stimulating. A bit like the *Manchester Guardian* crossword puzzle. Or like tying up Houdini.’

She has always been sensitive to every form of injustice, and becoming a teenager during the 1930s as the Nazis took power made her even more politically conscious. She joined the Youth Front Against War and Fascism and went to a huge Socialist Camp on the Yorkshire Moors. Later, living in London, she became a member of the Marylebone Communist Party. She sold *Challenge* at Marble Arch, standing next to a Blackshirt who is selling *Action*. ‘One or two people buy from me. Nobody buys from him.’ Her sense of humour saves her from being too serious a believer. ‘Oh, those Soviet Sportsgirls on the pages of *Challenge*! Bent back like bows, their breasts straining against their Aertex blouses, their nipples like the thrusting tips of arrows – Twang! And they speed off into the sunrise! We laugh at them.’

Two young men who have been her lovers leave England to fight with the Republicans in Spain, and both of them are killed there. Later, Alf’s shabby, blood-stiffened wallet containing his few documents arrived by post. He had chosen her as next of kin to receive this last souvenir of his existence. The rest of their group of friends continue to meet. One day they hear Chamberlain’s

announcement that war has been declared. ‘And suddenly – a terrible sound! . . . It moans on and on, up and down, swooping, scooping, sickeningly. The first air-raid siren.’

The volume ends here. In due course, Lelia Berg married and had two children. She went on to a fruitful and distinguished career as a writer about or for children, as well as producing this extraordinary document near the end of her life.

The Moon Shines Bright

1921–1923

I am the Bridesmaid.

I stand on the table.

Sidney's mother is making me a pale-pink frock for Auntie Ettie's wedding. I have to turn round very slowly, while she takes pins out of her mouth like fishbones and squeezes them into my frock.

I must not speak. I must not think. I must not be a nuisance. I must not really be here.

I am turning round very very slowly like the girl on the music box, standing on the windowsill.

The electric lights tinkle. I hear them like bells.

It is so big, this room. It is called The Assembly Rooms. Not Room. Rooms. Just one room is a *rooms*, because it is so big.

The music sways and curls and dances like the flame of the candle on Friday night. The floor is skiddy, slippery, slidey. I want to sing and shout. I slip my hand into Daddy's, and lean against his knee and look upwards at him. I am so happy. I want to be happy with him.

He snatches his hand away and throws his look at me as if he is throwing a stone. He hates me! My heart stops beating. I am frozen inside. Auntie Ettie says 'Oh look at her! You shouldn't do that to her! She's only three!' Her voice is like a faraway train.

I am hungry. I go and ask Edna for a butty. First she says she is busy, because all the visitors are here. I ask her again. Then she says 'We've got no bread!'

So I go as fast as I can to Mrs Kolnikoff. There are newspapers in the street that wrap themselves round my feet and try to stop me, but I keep kicking them away. The shop is full of people. I try to push between their legs and I get hold of their skirts to pull them so that they let me through. They are like fat trees.

Mrs Kolnikoff can't see me.

At last the shop is empty. Then she sees me. She says 'Hello, pet, what do you want?' and I say 'Bread.' She says 'What kind of bread?' and I point to a really big one, the long kind with seeds. Not the seeds like dashes, but the seeds like dots. She gives it me, and she holds out her hand for the money. But I don't have money, so she says 'When your mamma comes in . . .' And then she says 'Mind you don't fall over, chuck.' She says this because while she is saying it, I am falling. The end of the loaf has got between my feet.

But I get up and take hold of it again, carefully, with my arms right round it. The top end goes into my nose, and the bottom end scratches my ankles and a bit of crust goes into my sock and hurts me when I run again. The newspapers are waiting outside. Some of them are stained yellow. They jump up at my bread like Mr Jernski's dog, as if they want to eat it, but I kick them away. And then Mr Jernski's dog is jumping too, but I don't kick him; I just keep on and on running, because we must have bread.

But all the time the top of the bread is warm against my face, and it is rough outside and warm inside, with a kind smell.

I run into the kitchen. Everyone is there. They are talking to each other. They stop when they see me. I say 'Here's bread,' and I drop it on the floor.

Then someone laughs. And everyone begins to laugh. Everyone, more and more. And their laughing gets further and further away.

I am Bridesmaid again. Standing on the table again, turning slowly. I am four years old. Sidney's mother is making me another

frock, for Auntie Sadie's wedding. It is a mauve frock, mauve, a funny sound, like a cow's sound. I like this frock. It is gathered up in little swoops and scoops with little pink rosebuds. Swoops and scoops. A funny sound.

I slide about on the glass floor, swooping and scooping. I don't go near him. I don't touch him at all.

At the bottom of the road and at the top of the road the trams go past. The driver bangs on the bell with his whole hand, clang clang. The sizzling sparking arm of the tramcar reaches up for the wire, like an elephant's trunk searching for bananas. Ellie has a picture of an elephant.

Listen! A motor-car. I look through the window.

A taxi came for Rosie and Louie and their mammy and daddy. Everybody went out to watch. They are going for a holiday, with luggage.

When the taxi had gone away, there was a little puddle of petrol where it had been. And Davey Driberg dipped his toe in the petrol and hopped to a puddle, a water puddle, and put his toe in that. And immediately a rainbow shone out!

I tried to touch the petrol with my toe. But he wouldn't let me. He hit me and kicked me when I tried. But when his mammy calls him in, I do it too. And I make a rainbow puddle of my own.

It's as lovely as the chalk on the pavement, when the chalk is trodden and mixed together by feet. But it's different because it shines.

Who was it *knew* a chair was a chair? Who could tell that was its name? Who could tell that, inside, it had been a chair all the time? And when whoever it was said it out loud, how was it

everyone listened, and said 'that's right', and *they* called it a chair too?

On Sunday mornings, Ellie and me wriggle down to the very bottom of our beds, and we stick our heads out of the peronies and talk to each other. The peronies heap up over our heads. They are white snow huts and we are Eskimos. We can lean right out of our peronies and catch fish off the floor and eat it.

We stay in bed late on Sundays, and when we get up we have banana and custard for breakfast.

Is stepstone like stepmother? Stepmothers are in fairytales. Stepstone. It's what you clean the front step with. And then there's hearthstone. And brickstone . . . Evvie and Angie Brickstone . . . It's really Evangeline and Angeline, like princesses' names, but we say Evvie and Angie. Sometimes I think they're called Britstone . . . I'm not sure.

Mrs Miller chases Sidney and Julie round the house with a hairbrush, screaming at them. They run very fast. They are very frightened. I get very frightened too.

Daddy never speaks to me. He is just in the same house.

The croft is black. If you took all the cinders from the fire every morning for years and years and years, and hit them with a hammer till they were very small, you could make a croft. When you fall down on it, your knees bleed, and if you don't have iodine they go green.

Sometimes there are gypsies on the croft in caravans, and they make a fair, and you can go. The horses are white and gold, and they go up and down, and round and round, and the children

laugh and their hair blows behind them, and they clutch the poles and they wave and the music plays. I stand by Mammy and we watch. Mammy says watching other people enjoy themselves is as much fun as going on things. Is it?

I wake up in the night, crying. I am very frightened.

I go to Mammy's bedroom, and wake her up so that I can get in her bed. She turns back the cover a bit so I can get in her side. Daddy doesn't move. I stay there a few minutes till I can stop crying and then I go back to my own bed again.

I hate black beetles.

They are all over the floor, and they stop running when you switch on the electric light and freeze, like in *Sly Fox*. You don't see them running because they run in the dark, but when you switch on you know they've been running and it's frightening, because they're so still. You can tell they're holding their breath, waiting for you to switch the light off again.

But it's worst when they are all over the walls, and you might touch one when you switch on the electric light. I hate the way they stand up high on their legs.

Yesterday I was sitting in the wicker chair in the kitchen and I looked at my arm that I'd stretched on the arm of the chair and there was a black beetle walking along my skin. I jumped up and shook my arm over and over again – I couldn't stop shaking it. I would have screamed but I don't know how to.

Last night I had the bad dream again. I keep having it. The little old lady comes down the street and she falls down and she can't get up. She tries, over and over, but she can't. Then she does get up, and she only has one leg.

I got into Mammy's bed for a bit, but I mustn't stay long.

You can see pictures on the croft where the gypsies are, but only the boys go there. It's made of wavy iron, the picture house. It clangs like tramcars when boys throw stones at it.

They have Charlie Chaplin pictures. And when it goes wrong the boys throw stones at the pictures, and then the man chases them out. Ellie told me.

*Oh the moon shines bright on Charlie Chaplin,
His boots are cracking,
For want of blacking,
And his old baggy trousers they want mending,
Before they send him
To the Dardenelles.*

What's Dardenelles? Is that right, 'the Dardenelles'? Nobody will ever tell me. I need to know.

There are two ways to go to sleep. I have my eyes shut, and I look up behind my eyes, as high as I can go, higher and higher, till I hear something click, and my eyes go over the top, and I'm asleep.

The second way is to stroke and rub and twist the place between my legs. It is a beautiful feeling, as if I've come home, like home is in stories. After a while, it goes into a click too, but it takes longer. And then I'm asleep.

Babies have bare bottoms. A lot of children have bare bottoms. Till they go to school, I think. It's to make it easier for grown-ups to slap them.

Zaidie Goller wears a long white cotton shift, like a nightshirt. Like children who have bare bottoms wear out in the street. I don't know what he wears out in the street. I don't know if he goes out in the street. He is a very frum man. Everyone knows that. He is tall, and very thin, and very bony. On Saturday afternoon, a

holy time, Mammy and Daddy take me to visit him. They sit in two upright chairs against the wall, and I sit in a third one next to them. Opposite them against the other wall, is a table and a chair. My grandfather sits in this chair, his side facing them, and beckons to me with his long bony finger. They push me to go to him, like a good girl. That is what people always say: 'Like a good girl'. He fastens me between his bony legs with his hard sharp knees, pulls down my knickers, and strokes my bottom in a holy way, on and on and on, silently, each Saturday afternoon. Opposite, only a little way off, my Mammy and Daddy watch, silently. I do not feel. I am not there. After a long long time he pulls my knickers up and lets me go, and I go back to my place, next to Mammy and Daddy. This is something you do, if you are a good girl, on Saturday afternoons, which is the time for visiting grandmothers and grandfathers. It's called a mitzvah – that's like 'a blessing'. It blesses him and it blesses me.

Mrs Miller is always screaming at Sidney and Julie and chasing them and hitting them with a big wooden spoon or a hairbrush. When she makes a bridesmaid's frock, she is quite still and quiet.

Down the street there is a very little wooden door. When a grown-up goes through it, they have to bend down. The coalman went through it today. He was bent right down, and I could see over his back. And it was *country* inside – *country*!

It must be a magic door.

Sometimes I go to thread cottons for Bobbie Goller. I have to go past St James's croft.

I don't like the goat. I don't like the tall sunflower either, that jeers over the fence like the boys in the cheder.

I cross the road when I get to the goat, and I cross it when I get to the sunflower, and then I cross back.