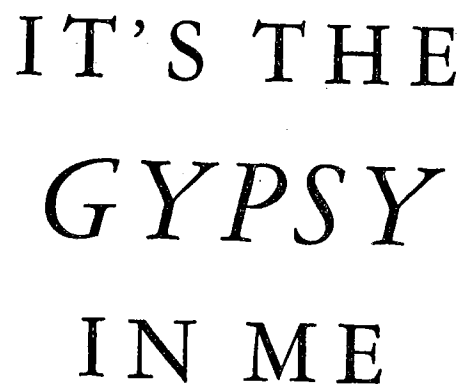


THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
KONRAD BERCOVICI



IT'S THE
GYPSY
IN ME

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PRENTICE-HALL, INC.

"The bastard needs some discipline."

The London of the famous ranch had become a sort of pasha to a gang of intellectual bums, but was still hurrying the social revolution.

Jack London was a great writer. What his writing lacks in artistry and intellect is compensated for by an unusual supply of vigor and movement. His stories proceed by leaps and bounds. He was personally very much like his stories. He had guts and real feeling. But he was cruel, even with himself, and cherished the memories of the beatings he had received from cops and in drunken brawls.

"Boy, what a beating that was!"

As overseer on my next wrecking job, it was my duty to see that the trucks were well loaded with wreckage and to get a signed, itemized receipt from the drivers for everything on their trucks, but the drivers were in the habit of throwing something, a door, a window, or a length of lead pipe, on the trucks after they had signed the receipt. When I attempted to stop their pilfering, things just happened to fall on me. When we had torn down and cleaned up the old Mouquin place on Sixth Avenue, I was without a job again. I drew the line at working with mixed crews of Poles and Hungarians. The accidents on the previous job had cured me of being a peacemaker between them.

When Bolton Hall's book, *Three Acres and Liberty*, based on Henry George's single tax panacea, happiness to the world by a different system of taxation, appeared, Naomi and I read it with great enthusiasm.

Bolton Hall, called by Arthur Brisbane "the American Tolstoi," had bought a large tract of land in New Jersey and was inviting those who cared to try out the single tax theory to come and live on it.

At sixty, Hall was a mixture of practical idealist, business-

man, lawyer, banker, artist, real estate dealer, theorist, philosopher, and flirt.

We rented a shack on Bolton Hall's tract for the summer. Courtenay Lemon went to live in another shack a few hundred feet from us. There was a brook behind our shack and across the brook a piece of arable land. The rest of the sixty-five acres was brush.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, in which he described the Chicago slaughterhouses, had confirmed me as a vegetarian. Our children, three now, Hyperion, Gorky, and Rada, had never seen meat, fowl, or fish on our table.

Upton Sinclair, a vegetarian and a single taxer, lived in a single tax colony at Arden, New Jersey, after the burning down of Helicon Hall, where Sinclair Lewis, still unknown, had been janitor.

Having finished reading some twenty volumes of American history and all of Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and given myself a course in the American abolitionist movement, I planned a journey to Arden, and from there to Fra Elbert Hubbard in Roycroft, where he published *The Philistine*, when the newspapers published a sensational story about the Sinclairs and the tramp poet, Harry Kemp.

When Harry came to pay our "colony" a visit, I saw a tall, broad-shouldered, lanky giant, with the eyes of a Savonarola and the high cheekbones of a Slav, who looked and spoke like a village priest. The Arden episode gave Kemp a great lift with a young Russian woman, married to an American, who howled like a mad woman after Harry left in order to let us know how much she suffered. She even tried suicide. Some people thought the husband callous because he wasn't overjoyed when a neighbor saved her just in time. I was sorry she failed. She was a pest, the worst of a half-dozen pests that the single tax colony had attracted, not counting a few nudists, some theosophists, and a woman who believed herself to be Cleopatra reincarnated.

Naomi furnished our shack with more taste than furniture and bought a barrel of clay to teach the children how to model and make topographical maps in relief. It was while teaching them that she taught herself to model and to paint. Rion showed great ability with clay and pencil, an ability I have always been sorry he hasn't developed.

I planted my garden, wrote, composed some music, and gave music lessons to the daughters of a Silesian nurseryman, two buxom girls who wanted to learn to "make oompa oompa on the right chords" when their father played a melody on the zither.

I wrote two adventure stories and sold them to *Munsey's* for fifty dollars each. I had no illusions about their literary merit. I wrote to prove something to myself, that in a pinch I could do hack-work. Having proved that, I never repeated the performance. The pinch never seemed to be serious enough to warrant any departure from the standard I had set.

Two months after we had moved into the shack, the garden produced the major part of our food. We baked our own bread in an oven I had built in back of the house. The heat of the summer ripened the berries. The shady woods were full of fleshy mushrooms. The Silesian nurseryman sent us all the apples, pears, and other fruit we could use.

That whole region this side of the tracks, was inhabited by the descendants of English Seventh-Day Adventists, all looking very sexless though they had large families. Old lady Fernays, a Huguenot widow of a Seventh-Day Adventist, spoke French well, was the mother of nine grown children, farmed her land, sold eggs and milk, and was the tax collector of the township. When Madame Fernays was dissatisfied with her children, she thundered against the English blood in their veins. When they were dutiful, she spoke with pride of their English ancestry.

Most of the houses in the neighborhood were dilapidated farm homes. The Burgmillers, the Rogers, the Merciers, the

Goodhues, and the Bergers were the aristocracy of Stony Hill.

Across the tracks, Italian families had settled in shacks on neglected farmland, which they made productive again. The women peddled to the neighborhood what they didn't use in their own kitchens.

The leader of the Italian colony, Maria Lombardo, a squat woman in her thirties, as broad as she was tall, with an enormous elephantine rear on short stubby legs, liked us despite the fact that we never bought vegetables from her.

"They got land, and they buy vegetables. Fools," she said of the other colonists.

When I asked her why she wore no shoes, she said, "What's the ma with foot? They good. Shoes they cost dollars. Foots they cost nothing to buy, and nothing to fix."

When I asked her whether she ever went to the movies, she said, "What's the ma? I can have better fun for nothing. I got a husband," and she winked broadly.

When her oldest daughter gave birth to an illegitimate child, Maria didn't "die of shame" or order her out of the house, but said, "He boy. He make help grandma when he grow up. My girl she no wanna marry the man. He not much fun. *Capiccio?*"

Maria was with her third husband. The first one had given her four girls.

"I try and try. No good. I told him 'Gerade here.' Then I marry another feller. Four boys . . . Good, eh? Then he think he great feller . . . four boys, eh? And he no work no more. I say 'No work? . . . Gerade here.' This feller I got now, he no good at all. No girls. No boys. I try two more months. Then I say to him, too, 'Gerade here.' I got to have some more child. I got to make 'em quick. I got no time for movie pictures. *Capiccio?* Sure you *capiccio*. You same like me, *paysano*."

A few years later Maria had built herself a big house, had two more children, gardened sixty acres, and owned three teams of

horses, twelve goats, ten cows, and a car. The whole Lombardo clan of married sons, daughters, and grandchildren lived under one roof and ate bread baked in one gigantic oven under a shed. Maria, stouter, rounder, but with shoes on, shook with laughter when I pointed at a young man in the crowd and asked whether he was one of her sons.

"*Dio mio, dio mio . . .*" she laughed, slapping my arms. "He my new husband. I got money. I got everything. So I got a new husband. If he no good, I get another one. I got money. I got everything. *Porca madonna*. What for live? Go movie pictures? You understand, no?"

I was hailed before the local judge by the constable, on the complaint of a neighbor that one of my sons walked about stark naked without even a fig leaf.

"But he did wear a fig leaf, your honor," I protested.

"Where?" the judge asked.

"On his forehead."

"Complaint dismissed," the judge said, laughing. "Defendant has complied with the letter of the law."

We didn't see much of Courtenay that summer. He was busy writing a book and burdened with several love affairs in Berkeley Heights and in New York at the same time.

When the leaves began to fall, our children, who had run around naked, or almost so, the whole summer, were as brown and as healthy as nuts.

I copied out some music I had written, two short stories, and a long essay on Richard Wagner, and took a train to New York. After a look at my music, the music publisher told me to write something for the trombone, the zither, or the xylophone, offered me a cigarette, talked to me in a fatherly way, and asked me to leave my manuscript with him for a few days.

I mailed the two stories, one to *McClures* and the other to *Munsey's*, took the essay on Wagner to the *New York Call*,

where another Sunday editor was now presiding, and then went to the East Side to snoop around.

Almost the first man I met was Joseph Barondess, later, under Mayor Gaynor, commissioner of education, and at that time a labor leader and a social worker. Six foot four with a splendid head on stooped shoulders, he looked like the ideal operatic tenor.

When we had seated ourselves in the corner of a café with two glasses of tea in front of us, he said, "You love people, don't you?"

"Well . . ."

"You like people. I know you do. I have read your stories in the *Call*. The charity organization has a bunch of investigators who are heartless. I've got the right kind of a job for you. I want you to go through the files of the applicants, pick out the ones that have been rejected by the investigators, and reinvestigate them. The job pays twenty a week. Doctor Worthman, who is in charge, knows that most of his investigators are heartless and wants the job done by a man with a heart. What do you say? Take it. It's something constructive and helpful. It may lead to your real vocation."

The manner in which the applicants were handled by the institutions would have been considered inhuman in the dark ages. The investigators were not out to help the poor, but to uncover the petty lies, contradictions, and private secrets of the applicants and to pry into their morals and the morals of their relatives. The spied-upon poor were persecuted and deprived of all privacy once they had applied for assistance. When there was a strike against a sweatshop, the sick and the lame were forced by the investigators to take the places of the strikers. The employers, themselves recent immigrants, were as callous as the investigators. The East Side was dotted with sweatshops, ill-ventilated, dark, cold, dingy rooms, with the most meager and unsanitary toilet facilities. There were no

fire escapes. No factory inspectors ever inspected those fire-traps. No sanitation officer ever looked into the rest rooms or cared whether there was enough light or air. Thirty per cent of the sweatshop workers were consumptive, yet all drank from one tin cup chained to the faucet in the hallway.

I checked on the reports of the investigators. Some male investigators had been generous with women applicants for charity for reasons other than their poverty. The whole business of private philanthropy was nauseating, criminal, and stupid.

When I wasn't investigating, inquiring, listening to heart-rending tales, calling doctors, or buying food out of my own pocket, I was arguing with the directors of the institution who accused me of sentimentality and naïveté.

"Don't you believe them. They are liars, cheats, and degenerates."

The poverty-stricken immigrants told me in a babel of languages why their girls prostituted themselves, why the boys stole, why they became killers and paupers, why, in general, they were predatory animals.

Some of the most unsanitary houses in the city, the so-called "lung blocks" with the largest percentage of the city's consumptives, were owned by a wealthy old church. Other blocks of houses, in which only the poorest of the poor lived, were owned by other charitable, educational, or religious institutions that paid no tax to the city because they were nonprofit organizations. In houses that had no bathrooms, no running water, sick immigrants wrapped candy in fancy Christmas boxes, made toys, knitted lace, and hemstitched expensive evening gowns ten hours a day for ten cents an hour.

When I described these conditions to the assemblyman of the district, he told me to go back where I came from if I didn't like it here. When I spoke to the congressman, he reported me to the directors of the institution I worked for. When I denounced the owner of a sweatshop for his inhumanity to the

immigrants, Doctor Worthman told me that this gentleman was a generous contributor to "our institution," and that *I*, and not *he* was a danger to society.

"My dear man, you are as hysterical as a woman," Doctor Worthman said, "and totally unfit for America."

At the settlements on Rivington Street and Henry Street, the "workers" were interested in folk dances and reveled in the local color without the slightest awareness of the filth underneath. A Mrs. Clark, a tall gray-haired lady, very interested in the Poles living below Second Avenue and Fifth Street, asked me to come to her house for supper one night and talk to her guests afterwards.

When I was through talking, Mr. Clark said to his wife, "Don't you think it is rather depressing to hear about all this filth and poverty?" And turning to me, he added, "And don't you think that these people are still better off here than they were in their own country? They can always go back to the filth of their own countries, you know! Nobody will stop them."

Apologetically Mrs. Clark explained to her guests that she had thought I would speak of the "colorful" side of the immigrants.

"Poor as they are, the Poles have Chopin. The Russians have Tschaikowsky. The Hungarians have Liszt. Dear me, dear me, they are so colorfull!"

"You should have told him what you wanted him to talk to us about," Mr. Clark said. "Really he has ruined our evening."

Naomi thought my stories unbelievable. I took her along with me one day. She was ready to scream before the day was over. When we came home, she hugged the children and cried, "We must do something for all the children, so that nothing like this can happen to them." Naomi was and is like that. She cannot see an isolated case anywhere.

Charles Edison, then a young man publishing a little maga-

zine in which he printed his own poetry under the pseudonym of Tom Thumb, one day came down to the East Side.

"What about the local color of these streets?" young Edison asked me.

I took him to see the homes of a few applicants.

When Doctor Worthman heard who had been making the rounds with me, he cried out, "Why didn't you bring him up here to let me talk to him? We need contributions. We are short of money. Who do you think pays your salary, the applicants?"

I went to see Barondess.

"What do you want me to do, change the world? The poor are no angels. You speak of sweatshops. They are horrible, I grant you that. But do you think the contractors and subcontractors are making millions? They hardly make a living. They'd go bankrupt if they had to put in toilets and windows and move into sanitary buildings. They, too, have families to support. This is America."

I sent in my resignation, gave up my files, and went to Stony Hill, in New Jersey, to breathe fresh air again. The trees were only half-clad that early spring, and the shack was cold, but it was clean, spacious, and didn't smell sour and sweaty. I dug up the same garden for the second time and went to see Maria Lombardo, who set a bottle of wine and some fresh baked bread and cheese on the table. All the Italians across the tracks were poor, but poverty hadn't destroyed them. Their hands were hard and dry, and not like the hands on Cherry Street and Avenue C, moist, soft, and cadaverous.

I was sick, sick with rage, impotence, pity, and revolt. Charity wasn't even a palliative; it was one of the toys of the rich, a pump to inflate their ego. What the manufacturers saved by not providing sanitary conditions for the workers was spent a thousandfold by the community on hospitals and jails.

Rion, my oldest son, taught his younger brother and his sister,

