

The Error World

Chapter 7

Heinz

In biology lessons I was taught that the big human limb joints worked like elaborate machines. The shoulder, elbow, knee and ankle, an intricate system of pulleys and weights and cogs and lubrications: when they worked you wouldn't think twice, but when they didn't you knew about it. One hot London after-noon in the early 1980s the left knee of my uncle Heinz stopped working, and as we walked across Regent's Park every animal in London Zoo surely realised something was wrong. It was the noise: unhealthy, unnatural, unforgettable. It was as if a comedy oak door (creeeeeaaaakkkk) had fallen on pine cones in the frost (crrruunnnchhh). The mechanism had gone. Heinz's lower leg was wooden, and some part of it – perhaps the attachment to what was left of his original leg – needed linseed or codliver oil and bed-rest. Heinz's leg had been blown off at the end of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, and if only I'd known it needed so much maintenance I'd never have set out on that walk, or at least made sure we didn't get lost. I learnt a lesson that day: modern wars are about oil, but for Heinz the peace was about oil too.

Heinz Bauernfreund (trans: 'Friend of the Farmer') was married to my mother's sister Eva. My mother came from Israel to London to marry my dad, and Eva stayed in Israel to marry a soldier. They were a lovely couple, but not obviously well matched. Heinz was a dashing model of uprightness, and had a job for life in life insurance; Eva was more rotund and warm: *gemütlich*. They had handsome children and a very busy kitchen. And then there were stamps, which occupied most of Heinz's leisure time and none of Eva's, a gender divide fairly mirrored throughout the world. Some couples get used to it – embrace it even – and some never do, and for my aunt I think her husband's philatelic devotions presented another reason to cast a wandering eye over other gentlemen.

They lived in Zahala, a spacious manicured village north-east of Tel Aviv, and the first thing you noticed when you entered their home was how ordered everything was. More particularly, you noticed how irritable Heinz would get if a cushion or drinks coaster was moved beyond a Heinz-defined comfort zone, usually

measured with a slide-rule. My father was a little bit like this, and I inherited the gene, but we had it mild next to Heinz. There was an extensive collection of miniature liquor bottles Heinz had picked up on his travels over the years, one hundred or so, some of them very old and definitely undrinkable. He had arranged them on a thin shelf that ran across the top of the door of the main reception room, one long limbless parade ground. They were so high that guests would never be tempted to rearrange them. But occasionally the movement of the door below would jog a bottle a fraction of an inch out of line, and Heinz couldn't sit down until he had climbed up and set the miniature world to rights. What would Freud have diagnosed in those days before obsessive-compulsive disorder? A need for reassurance; the pleasure and security of ownership; a desire to have everything just as it was and should be forever.

Zahala was neat too. Built after the war for career soldiers and permanent casualties, it was like a model kibbutz without the early mornings. For years its most famous resident was General Moshe Dayan, the Israeli defence minister during the Six Day War. Dayan lost his left eye fighting in Lebanon in 1941, and he wore his black eye-patch like a medal of honour (his bodyguard sold it after his death, and it appeared on eBay to maximum outrage in 2005). When a drawing of Dayan appeared on a first-day cover, my uncle walked a few paces up the road and got him to sign it. Zahala's other famous resident was Ariel Sharon, a future prime minister, though few would have predicted it during my uncle's time. In the early 1970s, when I first saw him at the Zahala falafel stand during a holiday, he was a bullish military leader newly embarked on a political career, and people in the neighbourhood were still very conscious of his personal tragedies. Sharon's first wife died in a car crash in 1962, and five years later their eleven-year-old son Gur and a friend were playing with the family gun collection – as Israeli kids in Zahala used to do – when one of them went off. Sharon was at home for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and his son died in his arms. In the mourning and distress that followed, local mothers rounded up as many family guns as they could, and delivered them to Moshe Dayan's house.

Heinz also had a gun, and he didn't give it up. It was self-defence. My other Israeli uncle had a pistol too; the founding generation never felt secure within their borders, national or domestic. In Heinz's case the gun was also self-defence against anyone who might burst in and make a grab for his first-day covers. He kept his stamps in a humidity-controlled cabinet in the coolest part of the house, which fortunately also happened to

be his study. Or maybe he just designed things that way: he would happily endure sweltering summer nights in bed in the back room, so long as his stamps were cool and safe. But would they be safe even in the study?

I slept in the same room as his stamps for more than a month one summer when I was eighteen, and how Heinz's nerves held out I'll never understand. Of course the stamp cabinet was permanently locked (this wasn't really about trust; it was about common sense, and every collector would have done the same). But I still could have spilled something over the cabinet, or knocked into it, or created so much friction when masturbating beneath the sheets that the whole room would have caught fire. Heinz slept in the next room, or probably didn't; I'm sure he was up every night with his ear to the wall, listening for potential disaster.

Because of its particular history, Israel only began issuing stamps in its name 148 years after Britain. This created philatelic problems. Every Jew wanted those first stamps, philatelist or not, and many non-Jewish collectors wanted them too. What they lacked in beauty they made up for in symbolism. The first stamps were issued on 16 May 1948, two days after the proclamation of the state, but they had been printed secretly in the weeks before, in the last days of the British mandate; they do not bear the name Israel, but *Doar Ivri* (Hebrew Post). There was a similar nervousness about their design. They depicted ancient coins, from the three-pruta half-shekel from ad 70 showing a palm tree and fruit, to the 1,000-pruta silver shekel from ad 69 showing a ceremonial goblet. Each denomination was printed in one dull colour only, orange, green, red or brown, and they had stubby perforations; nothing really to get the heart pounding.

Hundreds queued up on a Sunday morning to buy the stamps, and for the most part supply kept up with demand. The problem for the collector was, what was one actually collecting? New issues were fine, but if everyone had them, what could set your own collection apart? Where was the specialisation and pride and prospect of jealousy? With no rarity, these were merely historical souvenirs. But then something changed. The stamps were originally issued with 'tabs', white perforated pieces of paper attached to the stamp at the foot or side, and the tabs contained written information about the origin of the stamp or details of the illustration. On the first issue, the tabs carried a Hebrew translation of the inscriptions on the coins. On an issue later in the year there was information about Jewish festivals.

At the beginning, most collectors thought the tabs unwieldy and

superfluous, and stripped them away before placing the stamps in their albums. Quite a large mistake. Some collectors argued that the tabs were integral to the design, and within a few years their views were accepted by all. If you had kept them attached you were already sitting on something quite valuable; and if you hadn't you cursed yourself. Heinz had kept the tabs. A man with a wooden leg knew the value of completeness. All he had to do now was keep them from sticking to his acid-free pages as the thermometer bubbled.

All the stamps Heinz sent to me in London had tabs; unfortunately he only started sending them over in the early 1970s, by which time no one removed them, and stamps with tabs were worth only face value. To me, they were worth less than face value. I never collected Israel, but by the time the regular packets of mint issues and first-day covers started coming over by airmail every two months I was too frightened to tell him. I felt I couldn't concentrate on more than one country, and I was barely able to keep up with the GB output, such was the ceaseless appearance of stamps celebrating roses and cyclists and prison reformers.

The other problem was, I found the Israeli stamps boring. Rather than David Gentleman and other elegant designers, they had designers called O. Wallish and F. Krausz, and they were seldom blessed with visits from a muse. Many stamps seemed to rely on things that were originally big – paintings, buildings – that were then made smaller and smaller the way people did when photocopiers first came out. They weren't designed, they were miniaturised. Also, how many bird stamps can one country produce? You couldn't fault the free-spirited hope suggested by these flapping creatures, and they were certainly preferable to something celebrating the latest tank movements, but I found them flat and clumsy. The packages came through from Heinz and immediately disappeared into a box. I thanked him for them whenever I saw him, but I should have told him, as delicately as possible, to save his money.

I was going to tell him when he came to London in the early 1980s. It was a lovely day in early summer, and we thought perhaps a trip to the zoo. Heinz didn't really like domesticated animals, especially pets, particularly chickens. He never ate chicken, not even kosher chicken, and chicken in Israel is very popular. So obviously this became a standing joke before almost every meal.

'What are we eating today, Eva?' I'd only ask this when Heinz wasn't around. My aunt's eyes lit up with glee.

'Chicken!'

It never got any more or less funny. We couldn't actually say 'chicken' in his presence, because even the word would sometimes tip him over the edge (he did have a sense of humour, but not when it came to this). I never learnt why, assuming it must have been an early bloody experience. But animals in cages he quite enjoyed, especially monkeys. London Zoo had long abandoned its Chimps' Tea Party, but there was still plenty of bum-scratching and nit-picking and mindless screeching to be had in the monkey enclosure, so we made our way there via the scenic route from Primrose Hill.

This was not a complex journey. You didn't need satnav to walk over a hill and into the zoo entrance on the other side, but somehow I got confused with the Inner and Outer Circle, and went in the wrong direction. We were almost at Parkway in Camden Town when the first unhappy sounds began to emerge from his trousers.

Heinz didn't say anything, and at first I thought it might have been his shoes.

'Is everything all right?' I asked 'Fine.' 'Want to sit down?' We did sit down for a bit on a bench, and I apologised for getting lost. But then we had to go on. There were no cabs. There were no mobile phones to call cabs. So we turned around, and the noise started up again, much louder than before. It now had an industrial air. I don't think it hurt him, but it didn't sound comfortable. We walked on, to the consternation of passers-by. The noise grew. This was at a time when there were still street traders outside the zoo – men with giant balloons, men who would place a slender loris on a child's shoulder and take photos with menaces – so perhaps people thought that Heinz was a new addition to the clan ('Roll up! See the Israeli with noisy trousers!'). But no one gave us money, and my embarrassment grew. For a long while it seemed we were doomed forever to walk the earth and never find peace. We didn't enter the zoo, but found a taxi at its entrance, and we were both sweating heavily as we climbed in. As we drove home, Heinz joked that he wanted to kick me with his false leg, but by now it was sounding like the Six Day War and the cabbie would have dived for cover.

Heinz and Eva died within a few years of each other, when I was in my thirties. I don't know what happened to his stamps. I assume he had given someone the keys to his cabinet when he had the chance, but perhaps not. Perhaps his son, once an army captain, had to break the wooden door open with a tool.

But I know what happened to the stamps he had sent me. There were two shoeboxes of them, predominantly first-day covers, all of them with tabs. I didn't know how valuable they were until I placed them on eBay in October 2006. I offered them as a job lot. 'Israel: Complete fdc's 1972–1983 and some mint sets.' I described what they were, the ceaseless parade of national pride. There were five bidders. The winning one, Henry3336, lived in Radlett, Hertfordshire. Along with his stamps I sent Henry a brief outline of their origin, but I didn't mention the zoo story. I put the £81.25 towards a night in a hotel in Oxford with my girlfriend.