

'My Uncle Leonard' and 'A Brace of Uncles'

My Uncle Leonard

Uncle Leonard was the only uncle I had from my father's side of the family. One of his father's brothers had been the first husband of my grandmother, who was still 'Aunt Anna' to him. My grandmother, now widowed for the second time, lived in Elborough Street, Southfields and Uncle Leonard lived round the corner in Replingham Road. Whenever I stayed with Nana, as I called my grandmother, I would go and pay a visit to Uncle Leonard, whom I always found working at the bench in his shoe repair shop, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and sometimes unshaven. He was always glad to see me, and when I left he would give me a few coppers from the till. Besides having his shoe repair business, Uncle Leonard bred Sealyham dogs. They lived under the counter in the shop and if I was lucky there would be puppies to see. After talking with Uncle Leonard and playing with the dogs I would wander into the living quarters behind the shop to say hello to Auntie Louie.

All this was before I was eight years old, and before I was confined to bed with valvular disease of the heart. As I look back I can still see in my mind's eye Uncle Leonard's kindly smiling face, and it occurs to me that as a young man he must have been quite handsome. It also strikes me that there was a strong resemblance between him and my father and that the resemblance was not only facial but extended to their characters. Both were good-natured, generous, unambitious men, who were devoted to simple pursuits, which in my father's case was his garden and in Uncle Leonard's his Sealyhams. Although Uncle Leonard was about the same age as my father, as far as I know he had not fought in the First World War as my father had done. The eldest of his three sons did, however, fight in the Second World War and was awarded the Military Cross. I never met either him or the next eldest brother, but I did know John, the youngest of the three, who used to visit me when I was staying with Nana after my convalescence. I remember a photograph of the two of us. I am sitting in my wheelchair in Nana's porch and John, who was of about my own age, is standing beside me. He is still in short trousers and already beginning to look like his father.

Soon after my return to England in 1964, a friend drove me through Elborough Street and into Replingham Road. Nana's house, with its white porch and well-kept front garden, was still there, but Nana was not, having died some years earlier, and when we turned into Replingham Road, I scanned it for Uncle Leonard's shoe repair shop in vain. The name of Lingwood was no longer to be seen.

Sangharakshita
Adhithana
11 November 2017

A Brace of Uncles

Uncle Dan and Uncle Charlie were my uncles by marriage, each of them having married one of my mother's sisters. Uncle Dan was Irish, and on marrying him, Auntie Kate, who was my mother's eldest sister, had converted to Catholicism, which she took more seriously than he seemed to do. I remember him as a tall, well-built man, with a loud voice and a red face, part of which was disfigured by a kind of carbuncle. He always dressed in black, down to the very boots, which were big, black, and shiny, as if to proclaim his proletarian status, he being the only man in the family who wore boots instead of shoes. For similar reasons, no doubt, he wore a flat workman's cap.

Uncle Charlie, who had married my mother's sister Jessie, was of medium height, and always wore a three-piece brown suit, with brown shoes and a collar and tie, and of course he wore a trilby. His face was pink rather than red, and it had none of Uncle Dan's corrugations. Uncle Dan worked as a stoker at Lotts Road Power Station in Fulham, and he was an active member of his Union. I never saw him when I stayed with Auntie Kate, for he would be on the night shift, and I remember her making up his bottle of cold tea, as well as laying out his dress clothes when he had a Union meeting. Uncle Charlie was in the butchery line of business, and he and Auntie Jessie lived in Chiswick above the butcher's shop of which he was manager. I never knew the details, but I gathered that Uncle Charlie had once got into serious trouble for levying an unauthorized tax on the contents of the till. This did not surprise me, as he was a betting man and may well have been losing money on the gee-gees.

It was only at Christmas and the New Year that I saw both uncles at the same time, when with their two wives they visited my parents at our Tooting home. The three men would talk politics, which my father otherwise hardly ever did, though he was a supporter of the Labour Party, or at least always voted for it. (His mother, being a property owner, always voted Conservative.) Much to the disgust of my mother and her sisters, Uncle Dan had a lavatorial sense of humour, which their protests could not always silence. Decades later, when the name of Uncle Dan happened to come up between us, my mother remarked with some feeling: 'He was not a nice man.'

Sangharakshita
Adhithana
13 November 2017