

# A Montreal Childhood

A recently discovered memoir by **Eric Berne** about growing up and coming of age in Montreal in the first decades of the 20th century. The first new book by the well-known psychotherapist and author since his death in 1970, it offers an affectionate and revealing portrait of the city's immigrant community on lively Ste. Famille St. during and after WWI.



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Eric Berne

**Editorial Jeder**

[ jeder: someone, anyone ]  
Sevilla – España

# A MONTREAL CHILDHOOD

Eric Berne, M.D.

**Editorial Jeder**

[ jeder: someone, anyone ]

*Seville – Spain*

A MONTREAL CHILDHOOD by Eric Berne

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*First Edition:* July 15, 2010

*ISBN:* 978-84-937032-4-0

*Dep. Legal:*

*Printed by:* Publidisa

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Printed in Seville, Spain

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## Prologue

### A Little Background

*A Montreal Childhood* is an unpublished memoir by Eric Berne about growing up and coming of age in Montreal. It is the first entirely new book by him to be published since his death in 1970, and his only existing purely autobiographical work.

When my father died he left behind dozens of large boxes filled with papers, many of them manuscripts of unfinished books and articles, including several attempts at novels, a children's history of the world, and a long, meandering autobiographical piece titled *The Old Stone House* which forms the basis for what I have chosen to call *A Montreal Childhood*. These papers sat untouched in his study in Carmel for many years. Soon after graduating from college, I moved to Spain, and during my infrequent sojourns to the family home I slowly began sorting through the boxes.

It took me years to go through everything, as I only visited Carmel for a few weeks every couple of years. Most of these papers now reside at the Eric Berne Archive at California State University in San Francisco. I discovered the Montreal manuscript quite late in the process, and was immediately attracted to it. It had all the hallmarks of a first draft and was full of long digressions on a variety of subjects, such as the state of Canadian rugby or reflections on current events in the world. Despite its rather chaotic state, I decided that it was worth trying to edit.

At first my work was very slow and difficult—what to take out, what to leave in? But one night in a dream I had a minor illumination that the narrative itself, propelled by the child’s voice, was the decisive element, and if I just followed that, everything would fall into place. Once I decided to follow my instincts, honed by many years of professional and personal writing experience, as well as a thorough knowledge of my father’s style, everything went smoothly, and I had a workable draft within a few months.

It tells the story of his life on Sainte Famille St. during and after WWI up until his entry into McGill University to study medicine. The book offers a humorous, affectionate and multi-faceted portrait of his childhood in an immigrant neighborhood, while focusing on his own coming-of-age, family life, friendships and education. *A Montreal Childhood* reveals many facets of Eric’s character, his intellectual development and psychological evolution. It also offers his first observations and experiences regarding his fellow human beings, which led to his later thinking about human relations, eventually evolving into the theories and practices of his main contribution to psychotherapy, Transactional Analysis.

Eric was born Eric Leonard Bernstein on May 10th, 1910. Eric’s sister Grace was born five years after him. The grandparents on their father’s side had emigrated to Canada from Poland to escape the pogroms and to elude being conscripted into the Russian army. In Montreal, his grandfather became a traveling optometrist. His son David (Eric’s father) worked days in a cigar store and attended McGill University Medical School at night. David Hillel Bernstein, became a well known Montreal doctor, the majority of whose patients came from the city’s immigrant community. He co-founded a clinic to serve this population, and named it for the founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl. In 1918 Dr. Bernstein caught the flu in the infamous influenza epidemic that

swept the world in the years following World War I. It soon turned into tuberculosis and he died two years later, at age 38, never having abandoned his practice. Eric was 10.

Eric's mother Sara was born in Pinsk, in what is now Belorussia, not far from the Polish border, and emigrated to Canada with her mother, Anna. Her father, Joseph Astrovsky later escaped his own conscription into the Russian army and joined them in Montreal, where, after a stint as a grave-digger, he opened a second-hand furniture store. Both Sara and her sisters attended the teacher training college connected with McGill University and became teachers. Upon her husband's death, Sara Bernstein supported herself and her two children working as an editor and writer for local newspapers. She seemed to have been the perfect intellectual complement of her husband, and Eric's wide interest in literature was most certainly due to her influence. She encouraged Eric to follow in his father's footsteps and study medicine. He received his M.D. and C.M. (Master of Surgery) from McGill University Medical School in 1935.

The world described in *A Montreal Childhood* is similar to that of a well-respected urban doctor in any turn-of-the-century Western city, with the additional and significant factors of the immigrant neighborhood in which the Bernstein's lived, and their Jewish background. The evocative and humorous depictions of the many social and cultural differences which reigned in Montreal at the time are among the books most memorable passages, as are the anecdotes recounting just how the children of Ste. Famille St. often painfully learned to cope with these differences.

Among the many digressions in the manuscript of *A Montreal Childhood* was a long one (some 10,000 words) about Eric's father's various scientific papers concerning his experiences treating the illnesses of Montreal's poor and immi-

grant populations, which included a severe critique of the city's medical profession for not taking into account the particular circumstances which poverty and even gender add to normal life. Eric's father felt treatments for things like tuberculosis needed to be adapted to the circumstances of real people's lives, and especially to the differences between men and women and the various tasks they undertook at home and in society at large. The established medical profession was reluctant to hear these things from a young doctor who was not attached to any hospital and who was moreover Jewish in a still largely anti-Semitic Protestant society. Although I couldn't include this entire section in the main body of the book without severely curtailing the narrative flow, I think it works well as an appendix, as it throws light on my father's background and the medical context in which he decided to follow his father's footsteps by studying medicine at McGill, his father's *alma mater*. Moreover, it shows quite clearly the seeds or model for Eric's own social humanism, and one paragraph, describing his opinion of his father's medical methodology, is one of the best descriptions of his own approach, or at least a statement of his professional ideal:

All this, it may be said, is the soundest kind of clinical medicine, which relates the ills of the flesh to the human condition, which takes the patient living in the world as the object of its study, and which studies that world as closely as it studies the organisms living in it. In this approach, quality takes precedence over quantity, and it has no rival in laboratory or computation. There is no substitute for the...repeated home visits, the continuous observations of birth, life, death, and pathology over a long period in the living family tissue, all passing through the alert, sophisticated, and intelligent brain of the creative and purposeful clinician.

Although *A Montreal Childhood* will primarily be of interest to those familiar with Eric's work, I think it's a worthy addition to his published writing, and I feel confident that he would be pleased by its final form and the fact that his congenial depiction of his early life in his native city has finally seen the light.

#### *Acknowledgements*

I'd like to thank my brothers Rick and Robin and Peter, and my sister Janice for their support; my nephew Nick Calcaterra who created and maintains Eric Berne.com; Lisa Mix of the Eric Berne Archive at UCSF; my TA friends throughout the world: Claude Steiner, Robin Fryer, Bill Cornell, Carol Solomon, and James R. Allen from the US; from Australia, Kerry Towers and Helen Wilson; from Sweden (via China!) Thomas Ohlsson; Roberto Kertész and Elisa Lion from Argentina; Gloria Noriega from Mexico; Adrienne Lee from the UK; Elyane Alleysson from France; and from Bulgaria, Galina Radeva. Special mention must be given to John Heath and Manon Plouffe of the Centenary Conference in Montreal.

My warmest appreciation goes to my Spanish friends Francisco Massó and his wife Ángela, and Felicísimo Valbuena and his wife Pilar for their incredible friendship and encouragement during the past several years; and to all my other Spanish TA friends, including Mariano Bucero, Rafael Camino, Rafael Sáez, Jesús Cuadra, Josep Lluís Camino, Lluís Casado, and Marisol Llaveró. Without the enthusiasm, imagination and hard work of Agustín Devós, founder of Jeder Libros in Sevilla, Spain, it's possible that this volume never would have seen the light.

I'd like to take the liberty of dedicating this book in Eric's name to his mother, Sara Gordon Bernstein, his father, David Hillel Bernstein, and his late daughter, Ellen.

Terry Berne

**Part One**

**Childhood**

## The Ford and the Buffalo Skins

On summer mornings we went in the Ford. Not just any Ford, but a splendid Ford with the thick spokes painted the color of a ready lemon, so that it made your mouth water to look at them. The streets where the patients lived were narrow, and often when we parked there were no other cars in sight, only the long green lines and shadows of elm and maple trees. If the call was a short one, Father left the engine running so he wouldn't have to pull on the choke wire and crank it up again, and I knew what to do in case of trouble: turn the key off and steer into the curb.

Father rang the bell and someone's faded mother opened the door into a dim house. Father went in with his black satchel and the door closed behind him. I looked at the door and the door looked back and said: "I'm a door and I stand between you and the mysteries of others' lives." I moved over into the driver's seat of the proud car and looked at all the doors on both sides of the street. A thoughtful man walked slowly under the sunlit maple trees, and there came the nearing rumble of a beer or coal wagon, or the frisky drum of a trotter stepping high between the long shafts of a black enamel *sulky* whose driver sat upright with a sporty peak cap and a long flickering whip. The beer wagons were the most interesting because the horses were thick and solid with mats of hair around their hooves. Their squirt was thick and solid too, and flooded the whole street majestically. Sometimes one would lift his ribboned plaits and the big black iris tucked under the root would open and leave a magic trail of golden balls. Then the sparrows would flutter down from the trees to get the oats for dinner.

Sometimes Father would take me on his rounds after school in the spring when the streets were deep in maple wings, or in the fall when the dusk came early. Then the sidewalks were full of children playing and screaming around the vacant lots. They were the same children I went to school with, but we didn't speak, from shyness on both sides. At school I was just another boy, but here I was the son of my father, and the children had coughs and runny noses and ugly outbreaks on their skins. I knew the names of ringworm and lice, and measles, mumps, and scarlet fever; the worst was diphtheria. This dirty street was their world, and I knew it was a world of germs and hunger, where I didn't belong and would not be equally received.

In winter it was a horse-drawn sleigh. The cabman would come jingling down the street while Father was still at breakfast. I would watch from the window, the breath of the horse and breath of the man frosting like white smoke from secret cigars. Sharp little icicles hung stiff and stubborn from the man's moustache and the horse's nostrils. Father would put on his coonskin cap and big fur coat, and Mother would button up my woolen cocoon and crown me King of the Snowdrifts under a soft *tuque* with a big ball of fluff on top. The cabman would say *Bonjour* or *Gud mor-ning*, and smile slightly with dignified reserve. Then he would tuck them in meticulously side by side under the enormous buffalo robes and they were off, with Mother waving from the door and little sister standing beside her waving with delicate wrist-conscious precision.

First there would be the heavy crunch of runners, then a few discordant jangles, and then the horse would paddle softly down the street in time with the music of the bells. People would be walking with red noses and their coat collars turned up, the rest of their bodies hidden behind the drifts which separated the street from the sidewalk. Sleigh

bells approached and receded from all sides as they made their way through the traffic. A fresh snow was soft and cozy with the runners almost silent and the bells muffled. Old snow was packed down smooth and sometimes icy. Then the runners sounded crisp and the bells loud with jumbled overtones; the sleigh swayed and sometimes skidded.

The streets where the patients lived were now white and clean except where a horse had yellowed them. They stopped at a door and Father got out and tucked me in snugly. He rang the bell, someone opened the door, he entered, the door closed and there was no more Father. I looked at the door and the door told me nothing about what went on behind it. Father went from one blank door to another and nobody knew how long it would take before he came out from behind one. The cabman sat for awhile, his head swirled in his own steamy exhalations, and I slouched snugly, content with filial patience and pride. Then the cabman began to walk up and down, beating his arms across his chest and slapping his mitts on his shoulders. The cabman and I never spoke, because all the French I knew was *Merci beaucoup!* and *S'il vous plait!* and all the English the cabman knew were house numbers and *Gud mor-ning!*

So I looked at the blank doors and the cabman's knitted muffler and flapping hands and the red-nosed people walking down the street, and listened to the sleigh bells, and practiced making cigar smoke with my breath, and felt good because my father was in a strange house doing whatever doctors did, like giving medicine and dislodging tape-worms and telling people to gargle, and putting adhesive plaster or bandages on their cuts and maybe vaccinating them, and treating mothers with babies that were too small to be born. But it was never a confinement, because that was the other black bag and something special, and he never took me on those calls. And then Father would come out and the cab-

man would tuck him in and get back on his seat and they were off to the next call which Father found in his little black book. The calls came in on the telephone, the number was *East 363*. Father didn't say anything because he was thinking about the sick people, and the cabman didn't say anything and I didn't say anything, but just felt cozy and looked around at all the things the street held.

After the calls were finished we went back home. Father gave the cabman money and we went in and kicked all the snow off our feet on the inside front porch. Mother came and helped me off with my woolen overalls and looked at Father, meaning "Is everybody getting better?" and Father nodded reassuringly and asked "Any calls?" Then we all went back to the kitchen and Father kissed little sister in her high chair and went into the office. Mother was putting wood into the wood-stove and pots were simmering there and on the gas stove too, and Marie the maid was washing with the washboard in the big white tubs. Mother pounded the dough and sprinkled it with flour and rolled out a pie crust with the wooden rolling pin. Or she finished icing a cake and left the icing bowl for me and my sister, and we tried not to fight because if we did we'd both be sent upstairs. After a while Father went down to the basement and shook the furnace and stoked it full of coal. At lunch my sister and I took our *Liquid Ferroid* tonic with strychnine, and it was hard to take because it was so bitter, but that made it good for you. After lunch, which was called dinner, there were office hours again. The doorbell rang and Mother or Marie answered it until the waiting-room in the front of the house was full of patients.

Father went into the office and closed the big mahogany-colored door that separated the office from where we lived. Once that door was closed, my sister and I had either to play tranquilly or battle with mere hisses, snatches, and glares, because if we raised our voices enough in peace or war to

summer. Through some intuitive pragmatism, my father not only managed to do that for me, but also managed to keep me free of rickets, allergies, and other dangers. In fact, although Father was daily exposed to the whole spectrum of virulent childhood infections: diarrhea, typhoid, measles, smallpox, chicken pox, scarlet fever, whooping cough, otitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, diphtheria, mumps, and meningitis, neither I nor my younger sister had one single disease while our father was alive except for a mild two-day bout of German measles in late childhood. How this miracle was accomplished in those dark clinical days is still beyond my comprehension, since I have rarely if ever encountered a patient in my own practice who did not have one or more of these diseases in early childhood.

## The First Two Years

The courtship, by modern text-book standards, was a bust (went steady too long, apologized to each other too much, did not quarrel enough), but somehow it survived. It can be inferred that during that period Mother was expressing flirtatious self-doubts and trepidations. By 1912, however, she was writing with the same firm bold hand that she used for the rest of her life, as shown in her correspondence with her husband when he went for ten days to Boston on some unstated professional business. At that time they had been married, it will be recalled, for three years, and I was approaching my second birthday. It was very likely their first separation.

*April 12*

Dear old Dave,

I'm so tickled to hear from you, you'd think I was really in love with you, which as you know, I am. I felt so bad the day you left. During the day it was not so bad, but I just wept with lonesomeness toward seven o'clock. I was sure the train

I recorded some of that year's events in a little red *Carnet de visites* which Father gave me. That spring, when I was not yet ten years old, I wrote:

Fri. Mar. 5, 1920. I was kept in with the rest of the class of boys because I.Z. and D.N. were fighting. Dug gutter for water with ax from tool set [evidently the spring thaw had arrived]. Went to sleep late because Sister was talking.

Sat. Mar. 6, 1920. Swiped a piece of gum. Was awake six o'clock, out of bed half past six. Made little book and sail boat. Went out with stick in deep snow.

Sunday March 7, 1920. Wt. 57 lbs. Ht. 4 ft. 4½ ins. Was turning somersaults and jumping and walking on snow banks.

Mon. Mar. 8, 1920. Received German outrages. [This was a book showing the pretty heads of little Belgian girls stuck on the lances of the Hun].

There is no entry for Tuesday. On Wednesday I weighed 61 pounds. On Friday I weighed 56½ pounds and was 1/4" taller than I'd been on Sunday, according to the scale in Father's office. This was the last entry, and winds up: "The snow was melting and all gutters overflowed. Got wet feet twice. Was absent from school because my boots were wet."

## Of Pirates and Joaks

First there had been pirates, and everything happened suddenly, like when you pop out from behind a door and say Boo! to Mommy or Daddy. They used to like it when you hid on the bed under the comforter and popped your head out and said Boo! and sometimes they popped their heads under and said Boo! first. But they didn't like it when you were bigger and said *Boo!* from behind a door, so you had to

give that up. Pirates were wicked and good people would suddenly frighten them and rescue the people they had taken as prisoners, and it served them right. And that was what my first story was about and Mother and Father thought it was a very good story, except that they laughed because everything happened suddenly. That confused me because it wasn't supposed to be funny. But writing the story was better than hiding behind a door and scaring Mother or Father and making them mad.

If I wanted to write I had to learn new words, which I copied out of Father's medical books on a prescription pad. After the word 'For' I wrote "medical words," and after 'R' I wrote: "amygdalae, pyramidal, polymorphous, thalamencephalon, tympanum, tympani, shrapnell's rivinian, subclavian, foramen umbo-malleus." Nobody knew what they meant except Father and his doctor friends. When I asked for the longest word Father could think of, he offered "polymorphonuclear leucocyte." When I asked him for the hardest word to spell, he suggested "phthisis."

I also kept sporadic diaries, which became more sophisticated as I grew older. At ten: "Got up at 6 and chopped ice." At fourteen: "Rode on my bicycle past April's house." I started to code secrets in French, Latin and abbreviated English. At seventeen: "Saw the big purple Stutz roadster. Priscilla is playing hard-to-get as she never walks past my house on her way to school."

These literary efforts culminated in the High School Magazine which was published once a year. I wrote a humorous article in French and submitted it to F. Percival Maybee, editor-in-chief of the magazine. It was a satirical conversation between two French giraffes on the subject of necking. It was not accepted. Instead, Cuckoo Inverness suggested I write an article on Chap-books, and he gave me as source material two books on the subject from the McGill Library. I felt very grown-up consulting real college books,

and I studied them conscientiously. The article was published, accompanied by a woodcut of “Jack Ye Giante-Killere” by Duncan McPhee:

Though Chap-books are very interesting and curious, very few people know anything at all about them. About two hundred years ago, these Chap-books were the main source of reading matter for the mass of the English people... These books were sold by peddlers, called Chapmen. On account of their cheapness, they were read not by princes and dukes, but by men of the lower classes, such as farmers and laborers, and for this reason they were written in colloquial language... The subject matter of these little books ranges from the historical to the humorous... By far the most popular type of Chap-book was the jest book. Thus one of the ‘best sellers’ of the day was entitled ‘Joaks Upon Joaks.’ Many of these ‘joaks,’ by the way, are still being used by our wide-awake newspapers...

## Bacillus of Koch

My father knew how to give but not how to take. One time I stored up pennies to buy him a birthday present—at Mother’s suggestion, a shaving brush and mug. When the day came, we marched proudly into the bathroom and I handed the package to Father. He was overcome with confusion, and stammered: “Thank you, thank you, oh my, you shouldn’t have done it. What a beautiful present. Here, I’ll pay you back the money.” “No!” said Mother firmly, and my up-turned face stayed radiant with delight at Father’s gratitude. But I was puzzled by the strange way he looked at me, as though my love had taken him by surprise.

Father was always for the underdog. For months I hoarded licorice candy in an old cigar box, while Sister ate her share as soon as she received it. One day I was enjoying part of my cache in secret pleasure when Sister entered the room and demanded some for herself. I refused, and Father came to see what was causing the ruckus. When he saw the

pile of goodies, he told me to share them with my sister. I tried to explain, but Father only said: “Don’t be so selfish!” Thus, now disillusioned about the virtues of thrift, I split my goodies with her, and the two of us ate at one sitting the whole stack I’d so prudently collected. But I didn’t learn that lesson well. Later in life I had to reluctantly split other boxes of sweets, painfully collected through self-denial. Abused thrift was part of my destiny, and the licorice hung heavy over my head.

**Part Two**

**Youth**

## All Out — End of the Line

The Durocher sisters had all been married off, and maids had become a problem. The latest was a queer one: a tall big-boned sensuous girl in a loose cotton dress, girded with a broad black belt that matched her straight black hair, and named, paradoxically, Blanche. To us children, all non-mommies between seventeen and thirty-five looked about the same age; but she was probably about twenty. Her queer-ness lay in her child-like relationship with us, as though she belonged to our world rather than that of the grown-ups. She gave us expensive nickel candy bars, which at first we were reluctant to accept. We knew that maids were supposed to save their money to support their parents or to add to their dowry.

One Friday I came home for lunch and Mother met me looking very grave. She said that Father had had a hemorrhage. "What's a hemorrhage?," I asked. "Blood from the lungs," she said. She talked to me oddly as though I were a grown-up, and told me to go greet Father. Father was lying very still in bed looking straight up at the ceiling. When I came in, he turned his head.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," said Father, and took my hand. We looked at each other for a few seconds, and then Father said: "A little boy should take good care of his mother and sister."

I nodded and Father dropped my hand. "Good-bye, Father," I said.

"Good-bye, Leonard," said Father.

Mother was waiting in the hall. "I'll give you your lunch, and then you can go back to school."

“Where’s Blanche?” I wondered.

“She’s fired. All this time she’s been stealing money out of your father’s pocket. Fourteen dollars was missing this morning.”

In the afternoon, when Sister came home from school, we discussed her birthday party. Mother had promised her something special for her seventh birthday on Sunday, but now it had to be called off. She was upset, and protested:

“But you promised!”

“Father is too sick,” Mother argued. We remained quiet all afternoon while Father slept, except when Sister visited him for a minute or two, and then we went to bed early, following Dr. Ottenberg’s visit. The next morning a big wagon arrived with a tank of oxygen as tall as a man, and Father’s brother, Uncle Ike, helped to carry it up the stairs. All that day and the next we played quietly downstairs or in the backyard, replete with ice and snow, and Father was too sick to receive us. On Sunday night we were given a makeshift supper and again put to bed early. Sister slept soundly, but I lay awake and listened to Uncle Ike banging and turning the valve on the oxygen tank with a wrench. I also heard Mother begging Father not to go away. I must have slept a little, because I later learned that Father had screamed a lot for want of air, and I hadn’t heard anything. The next thing I did hear was Mother downstairs calling Father’s name. From the way she called it and the sounds which followed I knew that she was trying to convince herself that it was nothing but a nightmare. But I knew it was not a nightmare. Daylight was coming through the windows. Sister was across the room and I could see that she was now awake. “Father’s dead,” I told her, and we both cried a little. Then we went back to sleep.

That day Mother answered the phone as usual. She told the patients that the doctor was sick. Some men came from

the undertakers and took Father into the bathroom and worked there a long time. Sister and I were supposed to play in the basement or in the back yard, but when we went to the kitchen for something to eat we could hear the noises. Uncle Ike was in the kitchen and each time we came in he talked to us for a minute or two. He asked us about school and laughed when he thought we had said something cute, and then told us to go back to the yard or basement to play. In the afternoon Father's coffin was placed in the waiting room, he was dressed in a stiff collar with a black suit and black tie. Then various men and ladies began to come and sit with him. The men said prayers and the ladies cried loudly. Sister and I peeked through the door but weren't allowed in. Mother answered the phone again, and this time she said "The doctor has died." After that she didn't answer the phone any more. She told Uncle Ike to send away everyone except relatives. Her friends came and cooked supper for us and climbed the stairs to Mother's room to see if she needed anything. All the mirrors were covered up.

The morning after, lots of acquaintances came to look at the coffin, and the children were allowed to look too. Father looked fine, but he was very quiet and didn't breathe. Uncle Ike and some other men handed me a prayer book and explained that I would have to learn a prayer and say it every day for a year at the synagogue. I couldn't read the Hebrew very well, I had studied it a little from books Grandpa had given me, but there was a transliteration in English and I learned that. Then they took me to stand beside the coffin and recite the prayer with them. *Yisgadal Veyiskadash*. Take one step back at the end. I was not yet eleven years old.

The funeral took place the following day. An enormous crowd collected on the wide stairs leading to the sidewalk in front of the impregnable secure stone house that had been eaten from within by Koch's little bacillus so that the walls

would soon fall down. Squirring into the front ranks were all the little kids on the street. First the men carried down the coffin. Then the family came out, and then their friends. The men placed the coffin in the hearse, and as it moved down the street everybody fell into line behind it. I looked straight ahead as I walked down the stairs, but I saw the other kids out of the corner of my eye. I took my familiar place as leader at the head of the procession, beside my cousin Yank. "I've never been to a funeral before," I said to Yank with some pride. I knew that walking behind my father's coffin was a man's job. The procession marched half way up the street, then all the people who were going to the cemetery climbed into big black cars while the others stood and watched.

We drove very slowly through the wintered streets. As we passed people stopped to look, and the men took off their hats. We arrived at the cemetery and the cars stopped and pall-bearers dressed in derbies and long black coats removed the coffin from the hearse. The women and my sister remained outside and the men and boys filed in. I was surprised to see the deep grave already dug; so even people as far away as the cemetery had heard about it, people who were neither friends nor family. The Rabbi recited prayers while the coffin was lowered into the hole. Then some men lined up beside me and pronounce the *Yisgadal* while I read along with them from the black book. Someone, perhaps Grandfather, threw the first token shovelful of earth, and then gravediggers closed in. Then we all got back into the cars. Back home, Mother and Sister and I climbed up the outside stairs of the old stone house and closed the door behind us. Mother gave us some milk and crackers and told us to play quietly. Then she went upstairs to the bedroom and shut the mahogany door. We drank our milk and ate our crackers slowly. The house was very quiet now, quieter than it had ever been.

## All Aboard for Widowville

We didn't realize at first what had happened to us. For Sister, just turned seven, it just seemed the way of the world, something else to get used to. She hoped, perhaps, that I would take the place of Father, but that was a role I was unable to fulfill. So many things kept happening to her after that that she had no opportunity to sort out her feelings. Thus she lived most of her life on top of a chaos surrounding a vacuum, through which flowed a rich current of vitality drawn from the solid security of her first seven years.

My attempt to be a father was short lived. For a day or two I strutted a little, much to Uncle Ike's amusement, then I settled down to my school-boy duties with increased seriousness. After a week I went back to Montreal High to finish out the year, with the understanding that in the fall I would have to transfer back to Rutland. The other boys respected my semi-orphanage, which was why, perhaps, they decided that Malik had been wrong to tease me, and why Miss White concurred.

I took to getting up early and reading in the morning so that again and again I was tardy at school and had to get late-slips from the prefect on duty. When my lateness became intolerable, I was called to the principal's office and given a warning. But this had little effect, and at length Mr. Buxton decided to give me the biffs.

Thus, one morning I found myself facing the principal's swivel chair. Mr. Buxton opened the punishment register, its binding scuffed from years of corporal pedagogy, and laid the thick leather slab beside it. I stood respectfully at attention on the other side of the enormous oaken desk, watching the preparations with trepidation. I had always observed alertly what went on around me, and now I was curious to know how the procedure was carried out, and also how I would react to having my hands strapped. I was perfectly

As I was absorbing this information, and wondering what would become of the ugly Russian woman, my grandfather said:

“I have something for you.”

He went to the cabinet where he kept odds and ends he had acquired in the course of his life and which he thought would make suitable gifts for his grandchildren. We had all known this cabinet from earliest childhood; it was a cornucopia of unexpected and exotic acquisitions, things no one else in the whole world would think of saving for us or even imagine that we would one day want, things which we ourselves couldn't have imagined wanting until Grandfather removed them from the magic cabinet and placed them in our grateful, wondering hands.

On this sad and memorable afternoon I was handed a little printing press with a font of rubber type, something which any bookish fourteen year old would take instantly to his heart.

## Reading

Within the modest security of Ste. Famille street, I was free of any but anecdotal cares, and could devote myself with a sunny and unclouded mind to my chief interest, which was reading. I devoured my school readers in one or two days, so I was at liberty the rest of the year to roam as I fancied through the storied climes of literature. My first memories are of Mother reading to me every night before bed: *Mother Goose*, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and *Peter Rabbit*. Soon I was on my own, discovering the heroes and stories of myths and legends. I read the fairy tales of Andrew Lang so vividly that forty years later I still get a shudder when rereading the tale of Kari Woodengown.

After *Alice in Wonderland*, I took to the sea: Crusoe and Gulliver, Stevenson and Verne. After these mythical islands I

sought out real ones in *Chatterbox*, *Chums*, *Boy's Own Paper* and the innumerable sailor books put out by the London Missionary Society. These were full of 'ard-working Cockneys and first mytes.' This was followed by the humor of Stephen Leacock and Mark Twain. The best humor periodical of the time was called *Answers*, a poor man's *Punch* much more intoxicating than the original. In the High School Library I found P.G. Wodehouse and Plupy Shute, who kept me entertained for a while. But soon, as far as I knew, I'd exhausted all that civilization had to offer in the field of printed mirth. It came as something of a breakthrough, then when I discovered S. J. Perelman and soon after, Robert Benchley, who said, "A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance and to turn around three times before lying down."

There was also the theater, which in Montreal consisted largely of vaudeville, though it was also a great town for burlesque shows, though I wasn't allowed to go to burlesque shows. Movies were much better: Charlie Chaplin, Bobby Vernon, Harold Lloyd, Felix the Cat and especially the Marx Brothers, always good for a complete rib-busting roll in the aisles.

## Of Hidden Things

I had always been a good code-breaker. I learned Pig Latin at eleven from Rudy Eckstein. One day when I was roller-skating with Bob Lever April and Priscilla, Bob challenged me: "What's 'teekee akee arkee' stand for?" "Tar," I replied.

"I've got one for you," Priscilla proposed with a slight asperity in her tone, "What's SBU?" After a moment's thought I answered, "Rat." "Well," she said with open irritation, "Then what's SZQ?" "Wait a minute," I hesitated, before smugly announcing, "Oh! Tar!" At this Priscilla skated off and soon the party broke up. From this, instead of learn-

ing to humbly dissemble, I decided that codes were no good because they could be broken, and started to look for other ways to keep secrets.

After doing some research on the problem at the Fraser Institute Library, I decided that the solution was invisible ink. I studied its properties, and ended up with a large collection of recipes. I wrote a brief article on the subject and sent it to my favorite periodical, *Science and Invention*.

About three months later, just as I was leaving the house for my mandolin lesson, Pat the Postman met me at the door and handed me a letter and a magazine wrapped in brown paper. I put down the mandolin case and opened the envelope carefully with a penknife. It was a check for twenty dollars from the magazine's flamboyant editor, Hugo Gernsback, for the article on invisible ink. I opened the copy of *Science and Invention* which accompanied the check, and there was my article on how to make invisible inks, featuring drawings by a staff artist of lemons and baking powder. I had just turned fourteen. Suddenly I was a paid author with my name over an article in one of the most popular magazine in Canada and even the US.

It would be nine years before I was paid for another article, and this time just two pounds seven shillings and sixpence. It was a short story about an old man based on my botany teacher, and it was published in John Middleton Murray's London-based literary journal *Adelphi*.

## A Moment's Crisis

My position as a student at Montreal High was precarious from the beginning because I actually lived two blocks outside the school district. Mr. Gammatt, the Rector, overlooked or forget this until one day in Fourth Form when I was called in to his office for being late once too often. There was something odd about Mr. Gammatt's line of

questioning on this occasion, and it soon dawned on me what the trouble was: someone had brought the irregularity to the Rector's attention. Suddenly Mr. Gammatt fell silent, and for five pregnant seconds he and I confronted each other eyeball to eyeball. It was quite evident that he was making up his mind whether or not to confront me directly about my residence. This was the first existential crisis that I had ever faced directly and alone, the first moment of truth when I fully realized that my whole future hung on the will of an outside authority in a situation where no *momma*, no *poppa* nor any other external recourse could help. I remained utterly still during this brief but decisive trial of nerves, and no visible or palpable muscle moved in my face or body as I stood face to face with my destiny.

Finally Mr. Gammatt nodded. "That will be all," he declared. "And you understand that you must not be late again for the rest of the school year?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, and turned and walked back to class.

Mr. Gammatt, it turned out, was a *menschenkenner*, a knower of people, more so perhaps than more highly trained people I would encounter in later years. Freud himself, despite all his knowledge of the psychic machinery, was no *menschenkenner*, and his disciples didn't require this kind of wisdom in themselves; knowledge, perhaps, but not wisdom. What I didn't realize at the time was that Mr. Gammatt wanted me to stay if that could be done without dishonor; that, in short, Mr. Gammatt loved me as he loved most of his pupils. But that word or that idea would never cross any of our minds. It was un-Canadian, sentimental and unsporting. Mr. Gammatt raised upstanding citizens by avoiding unnecessary communication on both sides, and even in his own mind; and we tried to do likewise.

eliciting a spontaneous burst of applause from the whole assembly of parents, teachers and pupils. Though my envy was once again awakened, Andy Lupin and I together matriculated into the Faculty of Arts, pre-med, at McGill University.

## Facing the Whirl

The day after graduation, the boys returned to clean out our desks. Cowie Hacker, who was Senior Prefect, stopped me in the corridor.

“I was waiting in Mr. Gammett’s office, and I heard him talking on the telephone about you. You should have heard the recommendation he gave you! Anyway, he wants to see you. I think he found you a job for the summer.”

He had indeed. The manager of one of the golf clubs in the complex of golf and yacht clubs which lined the St. Lawrence River to the west, had asked Mr. Gammett to recommend a student for light office work. He instructed me to go out to Dorval for an interview. It was a pleasant trip on a little train that left the station with the engine running in reverse and facing backward, and returned with the engine facing forward. I knew that this was a strictly Protestant golf club, but the manager, Major Ruskin, a one-armed veteran of Belleau Wood, received me affably enough on the basis of Mr. Gammett’s recommendation, and I landed the job at \$60 a month, to start in two weeks.

To honor the occasion, Mother sent me on vacation. I was thoroughly familiar with the Jewish areas of the Laurentian Hills reached by the Canadian Pacific Railroad, so I decided to explore the Protestant territory serviced by the Canadian National. There, in a little Swiss boarding house, I met a tall, pretty girl with long strawberry hair, also a recent graduate of Montreal High, who was shy and overly timid

from slight acne. Like me, she was totally inexperienced. Her name was Uta Ritterhausen.

Our first evening in the mountains was a double date with her girl-friend, Tony Barlow, and a local carpenter's apprentice named Horst. Horst treated Tony with dude-rancher suavety, while I was clumsy and over-eager and failed to make the proper distinction between necking and petting, which Horst understood very well. Uta responded with more embarrassment than anger to my awkwardness, and we continued our friendship when we got back to the city. Neither of our mothers displayed much enthusiasm for our relationship, but our friendship survived. She was probably no more popular with boys than I was with girls. Neither of us examined our relationship very closely; she was satisfied to have someone she could call her boy-friend and I someone I could call my girl.

So there was I, a direct descendant of Adam and Eve, facing the world at seventeen. I had few material things and no spending money, but I had lots of relatives, a card admitting me to college, a job and a girlfriend. The most important things I owned were in my head. First, all the things that had been put there by my parents and teachers, by books and by friends: freedoms and duties, aspirations and prohibitions. Second, all the knowledge of the world and its ways, and of the things it had to offer and could take away. Third, all the memories and desires that had grown in me since birth, all the hopes and ideals and strivings and creations that welled up from my youthful soul. So I could stride down the street, head up, swinging my arms straight and firm like a free British subject, and feel myself a part of the world, with all its trees and birds and beasts and people that pulsed and strove on the earth and above it, and yes, the questing roots below its surface as well.

And that's how I emerged from the solid stone house one day in June, 1927, on my way to catch the train to report to work, and shortly thereafter to study medicine at McGill.

*Finis*

*12/25/66*

# APPENDIX

## Some Comments on the Medical Papers of David Bernstein

### 1

Dr. J.H. Pratt, of Boston, was an early writer on the subject of treating ambulatory consumptives. One of his devices was to hold classes for his patients, and in this way he became the father of modern group therapy. His 1907 article entitled "The Class Method of Treating Consumption in the Homes of the Poor" is generally regarded as the seminal article in the field, and is always quoted by historians of group therapy, although few people have seen a copy of the original paper.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtful if Father had read this paper, since he makes no mention of classes, although he might well have arranged for such meetings to be held at the Herzl Dispensary, of which he was one of the founders. However, he did instruct his patients individually in considerable detail as to how to take care of themselves at home. Here is what he told the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society on June 1, 1917, published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* in January, 1918:

According to the latest reports from the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis, there are in the United States about one million persons suffering from tuberculosis, while there is accommodation in sanatoria for only 45,000 patients. These institutions include accommodation for incipient and advanced cases, children's hospitals, almshouse hospitals, hospitals for insane patients, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jnl. Amer. Med. Assoc. xix: 755-759, August 31, 1907.

loneliness in one's own home. In order to overcome this lonely feeling people spend five or six evenings a week away from their homes, thus depriving themselves of the proper amount of rest...In time this lack begins to tell.

The remedy is not to advise people to refrain from amusement, but to alter the methods in vogue. This can be accomplished by using the existing school buildings and grounds in each district. There is no valid reason why a school building belonging to the public and maintained in good condition with public money, should be closed most of the time. Instead of being compelled to seek amusement at some distance from home why could not the adult population of a district utilize a heated, well ventilated and a well equipped public building...the school gymnasium could be utilized for gymnastic classes, for exhibiting works of art, for dancing, for amateur theatrical plays, for cinema shows, and for lectures. Class rooms could be utilized for meetings of young people's local clubs, literary and debating societies. Young boys and girls would not be forced to meet on street corners, but would have a regular meeting place constantly guarded by the various moral forces of the community and under the watchful eyes of friends. Neighbors would get acquainted with each other and would also become more sociable. This would remove the necessity for people constantly to seek new forms of excitement in order to overcome the feeling of loneliness so prevalent in large cities. Such an arrangement would have a tendency to diminish crime and delinquency.

Perhaps the real hero of this article is not Father, who after all was answerable only to his own conscience, but the editor who had the courage and discrimination to put it in print in the Canadian Medical Association Journal of half a century ago.

## Postscript

This remarkable little book is the result of the happy confluence of three notable events: One, Eric Berne's birthday centenary being celebrated in Montreal in 2010, two, the loving labors of his youngest son Terry, who unearthed and edited the autobiographical notes of Eric's Montreal childhood, and three, the energetic devotion of Agustín Devós from Sevilla, Spain, who single handedly is building a Spanish publishing house—Jeder Libros—exclusively devoted to transactional analysis.

That Eric was writing an autobiography of his childhood in the few years before his death in 1970 was unknown to us at the San Francisco seminar. It is one of the many hidden facts that the Great Pyramid (as he named himself in a cryptic scribble on my living room wall in Berkeley on his 60th birthday) kept locked away in hermetic chambers that have been methodically unearthed by Terry over the last years. Examples: His persecution by the Select Committee on Un-American Activities in the early fifties, his opinions and feelings about communism and Marxist theory, and now, the many facets of his Montreal childhood.

For me these stories hold bottomless fascination as they illuminate the hidden mysteries of the Eric I knew. The utter

respect and love for his ailing physician father—“*pauperibus medicus*”<sup>1</sup>—, his athletic prowess and ambitions, his electrifying intelligence, and his early interest in starting clubs, of which the 2010 Montreal conference is a crowning achievement. Finally it vividly illustrates what appears to have been a happy, intellectually stimulating, secular Jewish childhood nurtured by his mother. This book also puts to rest the outlandish rumors that he was regularly beaten as a child by his father, or that he was personally spat on by anti-Semites on his way to school. *Enfin*, this is a joyous, engrossing read that will bewitch transactional analysis fans the world over.

Thank you, Terry and Agustín, for this gift. May it have an ample readership.

Claude Steiner, PhD, TM  
Berkeley July 2010

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<sup>1</sup> 1961. Berne E., *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*. Dedication page. New York, Grove Press.