

Chapter 1. Boyhood

José Enriques Moyal was born in Jerusalem on 1 October, 1910, on the eastern side of Jerusalem (a point of precision of some significance later) to his mother, Claire Calmé, a French schoolteacher brought to Palestine by her parent, an Inspector of Schools, and David Moyal, his lawyer father. David Moyal belonged to an upper-middle class family of Sephardic Jews (the prominent Sephardic Savon family) whose forebears, following the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492, dispersed into parts of the Ottoman Empire — in their case Palestine — and in ensuing years came to fill professional places as lawyers, judges, doctors, civil servants and prominent merchants in Turkish society.

The Moyals were secular Jews who, while well-assimilated, maintained something of their Spanish heritage. Joe's grandfather, the most prominent merchant in Jaffa in his time, had as a Spanish speaker, extended lavish hospitality to King Alfonso of Spain when he visited the Holy Land during the 1870s and, in return, the King conferred Spanish nationality upon him to serve as the Spanish Consul in Jaffa. David Moyal and later his son, Joe, were resultingly born and registered as Spanish, although the grandfather retained his Turkish title as a Bey. This was a title which he also acquired by purchase for his eldest son David, and, later, for David's eldest son José Enrique. Joe would relate happily the story of how he became a Bey while still in his cradle, through his grandfather's connections. His title, he discovered, was awarded for 'bravery in the field of battle'! Such titles were swiftly abolished in the newly established Turkey by Kemal Attaturk.

At the time of Joe's birth, there were probably no more than 40,000 Jews living in the wide land of Palestine, with its golden deserts, roaming hills and deep ravines. Tel Aviv, where David Moyal took up his legal practice after 1909, was little more than a small ragged town on the seaboard, while Jerusalem, the City of David and once one of the illustrious cities of the world, had sunk into a decrepitude far removed from its days of historical glory.

Figure 1.1. Palestine under the British Mandate 1922–1948



Yet change was nibbling at the edges of this little developed country. From the late 1870s, responding to Theodor Herzl's enunciation of a Zionist State, Jewish migrants from Russia and Eastern Europe were entering Palestine in increasing numbers. Buoyed by their plans for a Jewish Homeland, the new arrivals worked diligently in the citrus groves, vineyards and almond plantations of Jewish settlers alongside the Arab labourers, and through zeal, hard work and self-education, prepared for the growth of their own collaborative agrarian settlements. David Moyal was the owner of an abundant citrus estate south-east of Jerusalem near Bethlehem and was likely to be classified by the politically up-and-coming émigré, Ben-Gurion, as one of those 'rich Jewish squatters' who 'were too satisfied where they were'. But Moyal had the reputation of running his growing Tel Aviv practice with a particular emphasis on serving his Arab legal clients and both his, and Joe's association as a child, with their Arab workers were close and harmonious.

In 1916, however, war enveloped the land of Palestine. Britain, anxious for strategic gain and a distraction from her terrible losses in the battlefields of France, despatched the Egyptian Expeditionary Force to Palestine and, in the latter half of that year, drove the Turks from the Sinai Desert. In mid-1917, with the British line concentrated opposite Gaza, General Allenby was put in charge, with the object of extending the battle to Beersheba and on northwards to capture Jerusalem. And it was here that the ANZAC Mounted Division of the Light Horse Brigades under General Sir Henry Chauvel — some 40,000 troops together with two British Corps — launched their swift assault across the wide, trackless countryside to seize the town and vital wells of Beersheba in the last days of that October.

There followed much bitter fighting in the rocky hills north of Beersheba as the British force thrust northward. Jaffa and Tel Aviv were taken in November — their residents moved further north by the Turkish military authorities — while Allenby took his forces round the Judean hills to approach Jerusalem through the rugged western passes. On 11 December, 1917, this quiet British General captured Jerusalem in an act that stirred the imagination of the world.

For the next months planning his forward campaign, Allenby would make his headquarters in the sandy soil on a slight rise on the Jaffa-Jerusalem road some twenty-five miles from Jerusalem. There he looked west to the Mediterranean sea and south-east to the fertile citrus groves where David Moyal had his orchard, in a landscape where the British 53rd Division 'had passed by' in its fight towards Jerusalem.¹ Final victory over the Turks was sealed a year later at Damascus and the occupation of the remainder of Palestine completed in late October 1918. Several years, however, would elapse before the intricate international Peace negotiations carved an infinitely smaller Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and assigned it as a Mandate to Britain where its citizens were British. In 1921, the first British High Commissioner took up office in Jerusalem.

In that year, then, the young Joe Moyal inhabited a country in the process of major national transition. Formative personal influences, however, had also already shaped his mind and conditioned a certain solitariness in his character. His parents — the flamboyant, tempestuous father, given to chasing an unruly Arab servant noisily around the house with a whip, and the 'tactful', innately conservative French mother — had proved an ill-assorted couple and, during 1915, Claire Moyal had abandoned her unhappy marriage and her small son to move to Egypt with the Greek Dr Apostoli whom she would later marry. Left to be reared largely by Arab servants, Joe would carry the marks of a rejected child throughout his life.

Nonetheless, it was then that he found companionship in the books that lined his father's library, ordered in grandiose quantities from abroad, 'almost all uncut', he remembered, and offering rich stimulus and adventure to the lonely boy, far beyond his years. There he would devour French novels, including *The Three Musketeers*, Balzac, and the magical science fiction of Jules Verne, and delve deeply into the culture and language introduced to him by his mother. Like other Jewish children, he was also required to read the Old Testament. 'We did it', he said later, 'for the same sort of reason that boys in England read English history

and Shakespeare. For us it was the foundations of Hebrewism and there was little else.'

Tel Aviv, a crucible of immigrant Jewish settlement, was now a little city, its seams bursting with arrivals from many parts of Europe. Young Joe, a thin boy with brown tousled hair and ready smile, joined the bustling group of the 'sons of run-of-the-mill immigrants' at the public High School. It was, he recalled, 'a pretty poor school'. Nor, *soi-disant*, was he one of the best students. He managed well in intelligence tests, but was not, in his own assessment, a notably bright student, until 'right at the end'. History and geography were his best subjects; he was 'always interested in mathematics' and 'quite good' at it, but his science was indifferent. Like others at the school, he spoke Hebrew and French, some Arabic and, more unusual, became proficient in English.²

His interests roamed with reading. He explored widely in history and would, he said, have liked to become an historian. Indeed, his historical interests, latched as they were in classical times and spanning medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and contemporary history, pulsed through his life, where his encyclopaedic mind made him a ready source of reference and knowledge. His curiosity about science was fanned by science fiction. 'Jules Verne and H.G. Wells made me interested', he recalled and, finding a growing fascination with mathematics, he turned to the school library. At the age of 15, he absorbed Bertrand Russell's *An Introduction to Mathematics*.³

Omnivorous reader as he was, he was also keen on sport. Joe loved the water and his happiest recollections of life in Tel Aviv were the times he spent after school surfing under a hot sun in a landscape of blue sea and a brilliant arching sky. There with his friends he would ride out beyond the breakwater on their cumbersome home-made wooden surfboards, cracking in on the high waves, tangling and colliding at times with the hidden breakwater rock, bloodied but healthy, equal companions — the self-styled 'Three Musketeers' — with Joe as their bookish leader.

In the buoyant heat, their initiative glowed. 'We formed a troupe of boy scouts,' he recounted, 'and obtained a loan and acquired a sailing boat

from the Arab fishermen in Jaffa and we had it sailing up and down the river which is near Tel Aviv. We also used to go out with it and sail along the Mediterranean coast right up to Haifa and back.' These intrepid occupations fixed his love of surf and sea.

If Tel Aviv High School offered only mediocre training, it produced some amazing boys. Joe, self-guided, would go on to an outstanding scientific career. His close friend Arnold, whose family absorbed him into their lively household and provided a taste of congenial family life, became a key physicist at the French Atomic Energy Commission (Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique). Well-educated in French, Arnold had become a French citizen and was studying physics at the Collège de France when war broke out in 1939. Having escaped to England and joined the Free French, he returned to France at the war's end to take part in France's nuclear development, contributing to the electronics and instruments section of the Commission, and participating in the building of its first reactor.

Another remarkable member, Alex Rabinovitch, 'the fat boy' of Joe's class and child of Jewish immigrants, would become a renowned hero of the French Resistance. Code-named 'Arnaud', Lieutenant Rabinovitch, a botanist and entomologist, fluent in French and trained as a radio-operator, was recruited as a volunteer by the French Section of the British Special Operations Executive and dropped by parachute into occupied France in 1942. There he joined the famous British wartime agent Odette and her fellow agent, Peter Churchill. Working together first at Annecy and then above Faverges, this outstanding trio managed for several years to carry out instructions from London to ferry other volunteers into key positions, rescue and repatriate escaping British soldiers, and hold the Resistance line firm.

Jerrard Tickell's biography of Odette depicts Arnaud as 'a loyal savage with no sense of humour ... his mouth full of strange oaths'. Yet he became one of the best radio operators in France, highly skilled and responsible for the coded messages exchanged between the French section and the group. All three agents were taken prisoner, Odette and Churchill to be returned after horrifying internment to England at war's end, while

Arnaud was executed by the Gestapo in 1944. Designated Captain in the British Army, Alex Rabinovitch was awarded a posthumous Croix de Guerre.⁴

In the new Palestine itself, the British administration was received by both Jews and Arabs as an army of liberation. Each believed that they would achieve independence under British sponsorship. High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, a British Jew directly linked with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and its statement of support for a Jewish national homeland, set out to encourage a larger settlement of Jewish immigrants but, anxious that the Jewish state did not bring injustice to the Arabs, he sought to foster equitable relations between the 600,000 Arabs and 60,000 Jewish residents. Even so, in his first year of office, the sporadic attacks of Arabs on Jews that figured in earlier years escalated into the first serious outbreak of violence. Through the mid to late 1920s, as further Jewish immigrants streamed into the country, tension mounted among radical Arabs.⁵

What views did Joe and his clever classmates ingest about their emergent country during their years of senior schooling? For Joe, and many more drawn from both old and new immigrant backgrounds, David Ben-Gurion's influence proved a touchstone. After his arrival in Palestine in 1906, Ben-Gurion had grasped the challenge and taken off to Constantinople to study Turkish law. From 1918, he became an emigrant in and out of Palestine and began to shape his own political party with a view to establishing a Jewish State. He had also become a scholar and philosopher. His views broadened as his plans for a Homeland met obstacles and delays, and his cry, 'Follow me and make the desert bloom', became a clarion call. Ben-Gurion's view of history, garnered from wide reading, touched a responsive chord in Joe who, from his own readings in the classical literature of his father's library, was stirred by Thucydides and the early Jewish historian, Josephus. 'The past belongs to us, but not we to the past', was the Jewish leader's message. Yet he also judged that the development of the country which the Jewish settlers were implementing with their growing industry and agriculture, would be of benefit to all.

Ben-Gurion, moreover, believed profoundly in the example of brilliant Jewish minds — Einstein, Freud, Marx — and what the tradition of such minds might accomplish in building a model society. It was a potent theme for the emerging scholar. Hence, while Joe Moyal would spend the major sweep of his career outside Israel, he remained an interested and informed advocate of his country's history, its struggle for independence, and its place in the world.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Allenby: a study in greatness. The biography of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby*, by General Sir Archibald Wavell. George G. Harrap, London, 1940, p. 234, and Moyal recollections. As a later resident in Australia, Joe, remembering battles of his boyhood days, believed that General Chauvel was inadequately honoured in Australia's military remembrances.

² Interview with Ann Moyal, 1988.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Jerrard Tickell, *Odette. The Story of a British Agent*. Chapman & Hall, London, 1953, pp. 158, 275-6.

⁵ Cf. Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete. Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (translated by Haim Watzman). Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2000.