



"My name is Aleck Bernstein and I am 46 years old. I was born in the borough of Stepney, London, England on June 19, 1922. My father, Harry, was a furrier, self employed, and some of my earliest recollections are of wandering through the workroom and seeing skins being stretched, cut and sewn. The workroom was situated on the 1st floor of the house in which we lived till 1940. The house was a massive brick built 4 story row house. The house and most of its neighbours had been built in the late 19th century as residences for clipper ship captains."

So begins an autobiographical folio my father wrote in 1969, when he was roughly my age, and it serves as my guide today as I leave the Whitechapel tube station and wander back in time.

First I need to navigate the present, and it is a very different one than my father ever knew. The district around Whitechapel, Stepney Green, Stepney, Bethnel Green and Mile End — in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets — is now mostly populated by immigrant families from the Near and Middle East. Going east from Whitechapel one sees Moroccan, Egyptian, Afghan, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, etc., almost like a map of that region shrunk down small and splayed over the Tower Hamlets, each ethnicity seems to have carved out a distinct area for themselves. I know it is not that cut and dry, but it appears so to an outsider, which I decidedly am.

A marketplace spills onto the pavement by the station in brightly coloured scarves and pashmina, vegetables and fruit, toys and appliances. Stalls are ill defined and the vendors are all touting their wares in so many tongues that it all blends together to my ears. Just a

street market lullaby lolling the tots in prams to sleep while their mothers haggle over the goods.

I pass an ancient facade, an alms house for aged sailors and their widows and orphans, built in 1695. It stands in stark contrast to the market place I have just passed.



I spy a sign across the street which sums things up to me, "Halal Chinese Buffet Opening Soon" it declares:



Just past the restaurant I see a sign for Stepney Green Road, and that takes me closer backwards in time. I veer to the right.



I will not find my father's birthplace here:

"In June, 1940 I returned to London having graduated from school, and it was while waiting to enter Medical School that the Battle of Britain air war started. Just before I was due to start school the house was badly damaged during a heavy night bombing attack concentrated on the London Docks. None of us were hurt but we had to be evacuated from the house and spent the remainder of the night in a shelter."

They had survived by hiding under the basement stairway, escaping with a wheel barrow of their most important possessions, and never really lived in the house again. So I won't find that house, but there are some survived the raids, and I can get a sense of what it looked like. Here's one now:



The other thing I can do is explore his old haunts:

"I was the youngest of three brothers and indulged in the usual boyish pranks in my free time from school and Hebrew classes. As a boy, one of my favorite pastimes was to explore London. We lived on the outskirts of Chinatown and close to the London Docks. We were also not far from the Tower of London (within the boundaries of the borough) and The City. All of these, then, provided many sites to visit and explore, usually on foot."

The City, the historic city limits of London defined by the old siege walls, is today's financial district, and I have already been there to shop on Petticoat Lane and such. The Tower of London I have already seen. That leaves the docks (that Chinatown being long gone, subsumed into Whitechapel). Off I go, then, to the docks.

My experience of the docks is necessarily limited to those I can explore in today's security context, which means the very public docks at Limehouse. Here are views from Narrow Street, a tow way along the banks of the Limehouse Cut and northern embankment of the river Thames. This is all posh shops and diners now, but is still a working tow way (see sign):



The Limehouse basin is now a hot district for condo style development, which spreads all the way down the Isle of Dogs to Canary Wharf. Quite a change from even a decade ago. Here are some of those developments:



After taking a few snaps of the visage of St. Elmo atop Our Lady Immaculate Catholic church I am ready to take my leave of this cathartic venture and traipse off towards Mile End station.



This is where the stumbling part comes in. I am doing a frightfully poor job of finding my way

to the station. My handy pocket maps don't cover this area, it not being "Central London" after all, so I read maps at bus stops and try to figure it all out. I take far longer than I should but this is some sort of penance, I am sure, and I soldier on and I do persevere and I have gotten home!

So, did I find my father? Of course not. I knew I wouldn't, and that was hardly the point any more. I know where he is, all I was looking for was to get a sense of where he was. What was his world like, what were the things and places that shaped him into who he was and that, in a generational trickle down, had helped to shape me. Did I find that? I think I may have, but I will not know for a while. I found my stubbornness, I got that from him, when I insisted that I would find my way home. I found my inquisitiveness as I explored his old sites of exploration. I found my sentimentality, not from him, as a shell of a building could bring a tear to my eye or a simple view of the Thames could transport me back over seventy years to when he gazed across that same expanse and dreamt the dreams that would one day culminate in...me.



See there, I have found me, which is really why I am here. All of the rest is just trappings and excuse. I have come here to find myself and I am beginning to feel that for the first time in a long long time I am hard on the track for that.

When I look at a well trimmed rosebush I will see my father. When I recall Ohm's Law, which he taught me over the phone over three decades ago, I will recall his patience. When I hear a light and lilting English accent I will hear him. He is with me always, and now I have been to at least part of his London.

There, I have written what I must for the night. I have reports on tonight's theatre which will wait for morning. Today started with an earthquake which I didn't even feel, and it ends with a recognition that one can be moved and shaken up from within as well, perhaps more profoundly even. That's a quake I most certainly felt.