Constantinople

U.S. Catholic, 1994

My first memory of my mother singing to me has nothing to do with a lullaby. I am about three years old and being wheeled through Brownsville in Brooklyn, then still a moderately genteel Jewish slum. I am sitting in a peculiar chair-like carriage, the sides and back of which are made of wickerwork (a carriage called, oddly enough, a "walker") and listening to her chant triumphantly as she wheels me down Brooklyn's Pitkin Avenue.

> "La-la-la-la," she sings. "La-la-la-la-la-la-la,
> La-la-la-la, la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la-la-la,
> For the Russians shall not have ConstantinOPLE!"

Sometimes it is "And the Russians shall not have…," and sometimes "But the Russians shall not have…" But always it is that whatever else occurred, you could damn well count on the Russians not getting ConstantinOPLE. And always that rising, hymnic note on the last two syllables. The *la*'s, I understand very early on, do not replace forgotten words, but are a sort of code that it is extremely important for her to use when singing aloud.

I don't remember wondering much at the age of three or four about just who the Russians were. My curiosity was focused on ConstantinOPLE—evidently quite a desirable thing to go after, especially for the people my mother seemed to dislike. What was it? A jewel? It glittered anonymously in my mind. Perhaps a kind of wrist watch? Expensive food? A special article of clothing?

There was a reason I couldn't ask the obvious question: the song brought to the surface some terribly deep antagonism between my parents, who at other times displayed a rather lively mutual physical affection. When my mother sang it in my father's hearing—say when she was bringing steaming dishes from the stove to the white enamel-topped kitchen table—he would look up from his Yiddish newspaper and growl angrily. If she didn't stop immediately, he might fold up his

paper, bang it twice on the table, and go shut himself in the bathroom while the meal in front of us grew cold. But once in a while when he growled, it would be my mother who would take action. At the first rumble from my father's throat, she would slam down her pots and her ladle and go stamping off into the bedroom. Then my father would sigh and punch his forehead a couple of times and go into the bedroom after her. There would be a prolonged buzz of conversation, and ultimately they would return, always smiling at each other, sometimes also openly fondling each other. But the food would be cold.

Early on, I knew that my father had come from Russia and had met my mother in London on his way to America. But his objection could not have been based on nostalgia for the country of his origin, I had good reason to know, nor on any residual patriotism for it. "A land of pogroms," he would describe it to me on our evening walks through the neighborhood. "A land of pogroms and corrupt police and starving peasants." He hated Russia and almost everything connected with it. As an erstwhile revolutionary, he had hated the old Tsarist regime, and as a Second International socialist he now hated the Bolshevik regime. In those days, he always made a ritualistic semi-spitting motion when he pronounced the Yiddish word *Russland.*

His rage and the song itself, I gradually learned as I grew older, had to do with war—in this case the aftermath of the Crimean War. It had to do with his feelings about war and it had to do with his feelings about imperialism, particularly England's role in both.

Just as, I came to learn, my mother's pleasure in the song had to do with her quite opposite feelings about England's empire and England's wars. She was a sort of happy-go-lucky bigamist: she loved my father completely and she loved England completely—and it didn't bother her one little bit that the two loves of her life had never been able to understand each other or get along together in any way at all.

She sang many songs, most of them from the London music halls of her girlhood back before the First World War. Some of them were so openly anti-Semitic or at least Jew-ridiculing ("For vy you hit mine Ikey?—Mine Ikey done notting to you…") that they made my father glower ferociously; others expressed such deep-in-the-gut London slum feelings ("Oh, here comes the nurse with a red-hot poultice—Mother please take me home from hospital tonight…") as to fill me forever with fear and mistrust of the medical profession. But she had two favorites.

One was the national anthem—*her* national anthem. Long after she had become an American citizen, whenever a band or orchestra swung into what it thought was "America," and to which most of its

listeners responded with a song the first line of which was "My country 'tis of thee," she would leap to her feet and lustily belt out the words of "God Save the Queen." Never "God Save the King": she contemptuously ignored all Edward VII-and-George V-come-latelys—and even more, their possible flibbertigibbet descendants. Victoria was her once and future monarch. She had watched the Great Queen's funeral as a child, and decided then and there that royalty could not usefully, in all historical conscience, go beyond that point.

Her other favorite song was the one I had privately titled "Constantinople," in either the *la-la* format or the original-words version. I only heard all those words daytimes, when my father was away at work. Then my mother's voice would come bouncing in from the kitchen and fill our little apartment with memories of a Land of Hope and Glory:

> We don't want to fight, but, by jingo, if we do,
> We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money, too.
> We've fought the Bear before, and while Britons shall be true,
> The Russians shall not have ConstantinOPLE!

G. W. Hunt's 1878 song, I learned later, which gave the noun *jingoist* to the language, was sung in the music halls by "the great Macdermott" into the beginning of the 20th century. My mother must have heard it there, or perhaps in grammar school. She had not yet been born when it was first published, at the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the subsequent Congress of Berlin. It celebrated Disraeli's threats of military action, which had forced the overbearing Russians to back down and agree to a revision of two international pacts: the 1856 Treaty of Paris that had ended the Crimean War and the later Treaty of San Stefano that had almost dismembered the Ottoman Empire.

Why this involvement with the success of British arms and aims, this "Rule, Britannia" syndrome, as I came to call it? She was the daughter of a poor Jewish tailor who labored in a seedy shop in Whitechapel, and she herself had been yanked out of a promising school career and sent into a sweatshop at the age of twelve. Yet no daughter of the British Raj in India, no lady of landed gentry in Shropshire, was ever prouder at being what my mother described, with a toss of her head, as "an Englishwoman born and bred." Even her later American citizenship, as she saw it, was no more than the expected, humble gift from a rather backward country to the child of a greatest nation on Earth.

My father was even more puzzled than I. He would have long debates with her at supper on the causes of the Crimean War, the tragedies of the Boer War, the crimes and stupidities of British

Imperialism generally. She would ignore his points and reply with her own, sentences in which fifes shrilled and drums rattled. Their argument was like Aquinas versus a parade.

Even late at night, in their bedroom, the incongruent quarrel would continue. Often, I would hear their voices long past midnight, my father's deep and thoughtful, urging reason, my mother's high-pitched and annoyed, demanding belief. Their voices would drop to a low rumble, until—my father's patience at last utterly exhausted—he would invoke a name that I came to know quite well throughout my years of childhood eavesdropping.

Jakey Adelstein. He was the friend of my father's who had introduced him to my mother, years ago, in London. "Jakey Adelstein," my father's voice would rise to a boom at last, as frustration overcame him, as the inadequacy of simple logic finally overwhelmed him. "Jakey Adelstein," he would yell in tones that shook the walls of our flat, *"zoll nor fartzen in zein kaiveh"* (a free translation from the Yiddish being, "Jakey Adelstein should only fart forever inside his grave").

The picture used to appall and confound me. A corpse trapped through eternity in a steadily increasing miasma—this was a fate far beyond hellfire. And the curse was in Yiddish, announced at my father's maximum volume. It would deliver the result, I was certain.

Poor Jakey Adelstein. He had been my father's first friend in England. He had not only introduced my parents to each other, he had also managed the campaign that led to my father's becoming the president of the Jewish Tinsmiths' Union. I always felt he deserved better than a fart-filled grave.

He had preceded my father in emigration from the old country—Lithuania in Russia—to England. And he had been demoted quickly, as I understood it, from being the first, the more experienced, to a relatively junior status. My father had turned to socialism and trade unionism, along the way converting Jakey Adelstein and other immigrant craftsmen he knew.

In the process, my father had become a recognized leader among a large group of young Jewish workers. He had become not only the president of a trade union, but also the president of their socialist group in the East End of London. He had learned English fast—faster after he had met my mother, of course, since she was native-born—and was a major speaker at rallies, a moderately important writer for the smaller socialist papers.

He took socialism very seriously. *Very* seriously. When war came, in August 1914, he knew exactly what was going to happen. There were by then numerous socialist deputies in the various European parliaments.

They would, to a man, vote against war credits and war budgets; they would call upon the workers they represented to lay down arms and refuse to fight. There would be a Europe-wide general strike. This had all been agreed upon in international Social Democratic congresses for several years now, the last having been held just one year before in Basel, Switzerland, where the antiwar sentiment had been close to unanimous.

And when the socialist leaders in country after country, with few exceptions (Ramsay MacDonald in England, Leon Jaures in France, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany), meekly joined the march to war, my father was only slightly disturbed. He knew, he told me years later as we walked through the pushcart area of Brownsville, he *knew* that whatever the traitorous leaders and parliamentarians did, the party itself was utterly opposed to war. It would call on the workers to refuse to bear arms against one another. Would socialist French workers ever fight socialist German workers so that their respective capitalist bosses could get richer? Nonsense!

To that end, as August of 1914 became September and October of 1914, as the first casualty reports began coming in, my father prepared for the inevitable showdown that would stop the war in its tracks. He wrote articles, he began to make speeches.

Everything he wrote and said had one specific point. All workers of whatever nation must refuse to shoot their comrades of other nations. They must not volunteer if requested. They must desert if drafted. And if arms were forced upon them, they must turn their guns on their officers and bosses.

"So simple," he said to me many years later, as we stood at a fruit pushcart, about to bargain on the price of bananas and carrots. "No workers in uniform, no soldiers. No soldiers, no war. The bloodshed is stopped right at the start."

But I, when I heard this—even as early as the age of six or seven—I already knew that it couldn't be that simple.

To that end—that there should be no war, no workers in uniform, no soldiers—he was speaking at London's Hyde Park Corner one day. An army lorry drove up. Two tall army noncoms got out, grabbed my father, and took him into the lorry.

They drove him to army headquarters in Whitehall. Then each noncom grabbed one of my father's elbows, lifted him ten inches or more off the ground (I, after all, am a short man, and my father was an even shorter one), and carried him into the building. They went down into the bowels of the building, corridor after corridor after turning corridor. My father told me he knew they were taking him into a

subbasement where they would beat him up most thoroughly.

But no. They opened the door of a small office and pushed him in. There, seated behind a desk and wearing a major's uniform, was the man he had always considered his political mentor, the man who had recruited him into the Socialist Party.

"Sit down, Dave," this man said. "We'll talk. You're not a stupid man, Dave. I know we can talk."

The offer was this. If my father behaved—cooperated—he'd be given the rank of warrant officer ("You're not British, so there just can't be a full commission") and a desk almost as nice as the one he was now sitting beside. He'd have to make a few speeches, encouraging recruitment in industrial areas, but he'd be kept at home in Blighty for the duration. All he had to do was to begin acting sensible, to stop being stubborn.

My father, alas, continued to be stubborn.

He refused the offer and didn't stop his speeches or his underground publications against the war. He announced that if he were drafted, he would desert—as should any self-respecting British workingman. In a signed leaflet, he called upon all men now in uniform to desert, to "walk away from the corpse-maker and profit-maker that is this stupid war."

People of a higher social status than my father—Ramsay MacDonald, George Bernard Shaw—who thought and talked as he did were treated badly in those years, but were still treated with some restraint. Not so my father. He was publicly beaten up a number of times, to the cheers of people watching. If he fought back to defend himself, the theory went, he belonged in uniform, defending king and country.

Eventually he was drafted.

He deserted at the first opportunity. Caught almost immediately, while making a speech against the war, he was taken back to the army, "in chains," he told me, and held for court-martial. With the help of friends, he escaped.

This was desertion in wartime, reckoned almost as desertion under fire. His name was advertised; there was a price on his head. His friends—among them, Jakey Adelstein, now a gassed and invalided-out veteran—hid him in the windowless attic of a cobbler's shop. He lived there for more than two years.

His only visitors in all that time were two socialist comrades and my mother, who some time before had become his fiancée. The socialist comrades brought him newspapers and books, and carried away for publication the broadsides he continued to write. My mother brought him affection and the more popular tunes from the music halls which

she frequented, “Tommy, Tommy Atkins,” “Knees up, Mother Brown,” “The Union Jack of Dear Old England.”

“One song she sang to me many times,” my father would tell me, a completely baffled expression on his face as we walked home after shopping in the pushcart neighborhood. “It went,

> What did you do in the Great War, Daddy? That’s what
> I’d like to know.
> When they called for men, I was ready then, to go and
> fight the foe…

“I would explain to her,” my father said, spreading his hands, “the mechanism of production for use instead of profit. She would kiss me and sing that song to me.”

When I was alone with my mother after we got home, I asked her why that particular song. “The poor man needed cheering up,” she explained. “Here he was young and healthy, and he didn’t want to get killed. Very sensible. But now the police and the army were after him, and he couldn’t even go out for a stroll. I had to keep him from getting too depressed, so I sang to him. A lovely song. Everybody those days was singing that song.”

(Thus it was very early in my life, very, *very* early, I think it must have been, that I knew my parents had to have had a superb sexual relationship.)

After the armistice, there was an intensive drive to catch deserters and similar overt malcontents, many of whom had come out of hiding. His friends had to whisk my father about London again and again, often barely one step ahead of the authorities. He married my mother in the course of this whisking; she told me later they spent their honeymoon in two or three separate hideouts.

I was conceived in the very last of these hideouts. By then it had become obvious that the only safe course was to get him out of the country.

Through union connections, a job was finagled for my father as a stoker on a ship leaving for the United States. He sailed (or rather, in terms of his function aboard, he *steamed)* under the name of John Smith, the alias chosen for him by his incredibly-skilled-in-the-ways-of-the-underground party comrades.

Many years later he described to me his sensations on entering the stokehold of that liner. “Half a dozen mouths of hell screaming red flames at me,” he said. “They handed me a shovel and said, ‘Go ahead. Feed them.’ I dug the shovel into the coal and I fed them. For nine days I fed them.”

Upon arrival in New York City, he jumped ship as planned. My mother arrived on the *Aquitania* with me in her arms two years later;

a cousin of hers in New Jersey had been able to "bring her over." My father meanwhile had found work as a tinsmith, but he remained an illegal alien—with all of us fearful of his being caught and deported to either the firing squad or the hangman's noose—until midway through the Second World War when, along with others like him who had led crime-free lives after their arrival here, he was allowed to register with the authorities and enter the country legally. He became a citizen as soon as he could, just a few years later.

He loved this country. He loved it as much as he had hated England and Russia. In the years he spent as an illegal alien, he had turned into a sincere American patriot, bitter and miserable and full of regret over his equivocal status. This change used to astonish people who had known him years before, and they often remarked on it.

Whenever they did, though, I would think angrily to myself, "Ah, if they only knew!" Yes. You see, from my boyhood point of view....

In his later American years, he amended his political beliefs many, many times, but in one respect he never changed in the slightest: to the end of his life, he hated militarism—armies, navies, weapons of any kinds, parades for no matter what occasions, marching songs, any and all flags. My hardships as a true-blue American kid were great: I was never allowed to own so much as a cap pistol; I was not permitted to join the Boy Scouts or the Sea Scouts or even the Cub Scouts; and I had to be careful to keep copies of my favorite series books, *The Boy Allies,* hidden under my mattress along with magazines like the scandalous *Broadway Brevities* and *Sexology. (The Boy Allies* were actually two series, one Army and one Navy, chronicling the assistance given by two very young heroes to our brave men in the Argonne, on the Somme, or under the submarine-infested Atlantic. Flashlight in hand, I fought the Hun beside those glorious boys every night until the age of twelve.)

My father's pacifism kept me in the minor leagues of the boy gangs of our neighborhood. Many of our games in those years had some sort of warlike overtone, and in them I was always the dreamer, never the doer, the participator. Until, that is, the Second World War.

There was absolutely no conflict between my father and myself as to my role, once this country entered the war after Pearl Harbor. "I see this as a just war," my father said. "A special war for the sake of humanity, not for the sake of profits. It's your life, so you do whatever you want, and I'll stand by you. But I want you to know that I see this as a just war."

I felt the same way. I hated the army, hated every dreadful day of basic training, but I never doubted that I was doing what was necessary. I came

home on my first furlough, leaner, somewhat more muscular, hoping desperately that this madness in which I was involved would soon be over, but determined to be a good soldier, to do whatever I had to do. I felt I was fighting international fascism, and international fascism was something that could not coexist with my idea of the human race.

My father's tinsmith shop during the war was on the street level of our house. The apartment was up a flight of stairs, with its own entrance. When I arrived on my furlough, I had to ring the doorbell downstairs to get my family to activate the buzzer that would unlock the door.

I was expected, and simultaneous with the sound of the buzzer there was much movement and yelling. I opened the door and saw my entire family—my father and mother, my kid brother and sister, even my dog, Rusty—jammed in a solid welcoming mass on the top step.

As I started up, my father left the group and started down, his arms out at me, vibrating welcome. I ran up and he ran down, until we were only two steps apart. Then, his arms still extended toward me, he stopped. He shook his head from side to side. He burst into tears and began sobbing.

I stopped too, almost within fingertip range of his outstretched hands. "What is it?" I asked. "I'm all right, Papa. I'm really all right. I'm home for ten days."

He swung around and went back up the stairs, leaving me standing there. He went past my mother and my brother and my sister and back into the house. He was still sobbing.

Later, after I'd unpacked, he came into my room, put an arm about me and kissed me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I hope you didn't misunderstand—"

"I didn't," I assured him, eager to cover over the strain. "Look, I've been away for months, in places you never even heard of. I'm not in any danger, but still, how do you know that?"

He waved an impatient hand. "No. I'm worried about you, but it wasn't worry. No, no. It was seeing you in uniform, my son in an army uniform. After all the deaths of that terrible war, after all I did and said and went through, after everything that happened, still a uniform, still an army, still my son a soldier. So this is a just war, I tell myself, so what? Wasn't that one a just war to a lot of people? But nothing changes, no matter what you do. Nothing, absolutely nothing changes. Wars, soldiers, uniforms. I saw my son in a uniform, and I couldn't stand it."

I hugged him and told him I understood. We sat on the bed and talked. His tears dried.

Then, from the kitchen, where my mother was preparing the welcome-home meal, we suddenly heard a song. My father and I looked at each other.

"La-la-la," my mother sang. "La-la-la-la-la-la-la,
La-la-la-la, la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la-la-la,
For the Russians shall not have ConstantinOPLE!""

The note in her voice was unmistakable. Triumph. Sheer triumph.