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Three Memoirs by Tony Judt

Joe

I hated school. From 1959 to 1965 I attended Emanuel School in Battersea: a Victorian establishment parked between the railway lines exiting south from Clapham Junction station. The trains (still steam in those days) provided sound effects and visual relief; but everything else was unremittingly dull. The interior of the older buildings was painted institutional cream and green—much like the nineteenth-century hospitals and prisons on which the school was modeled. Scattered postwar embellishments suffered from cheap materials and inadequate insulation. The playing fields, though broad and green, seemed to me cold and unfriendly: no doubt because of the cheerless muscular Christianity that I came to associate with them.

This grim institution, to which I repaired six times a week (Saturday morning rugby was compulsory) for nearly seven years, cost my parents nothing. Emanuel was “direct grant”: an independent, self-governing secondary school subsidized by the local authorities and open to any boy who did well at the national examinations for eleven-year-olds (“11+”) and who was accepted after interview. These establishments, often of venerable vintage (Emanuel had been founded in the reign of Elizabeth I), ranked with the great public schools of England, as well as the best of the state grammar schools whose curriculum they closely followed.

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the experience). Physical education was neglected, at least by American standards: we took one PE class per week, much of it spent awaiting our turn on the vaulting horse or the wrestling mat. I boxed a little (to please my father, who had boxed a lot and rather successfully); was a passable sprinter; and—to everyone’s surprise—turned out to be a better-than-average rugby player. But none of these activities ever caught my imagination or lifted my spirit.

Least of all was I attracted to the absurd “Combined Cadet Force” (CCF), in which small boys were instructed in basic military drill and the use of

took not just history but also French and German and was deemed by my future teachers to have performed beyond the level of the high school leaving exams. Upon learning this I wrote immediately to King’s to ask whether I might be excused from sitting my A Levels; “yes,” they replied. That very day I walked into the school office to announce that I was dropping out. I recall few happier moments and no regrets.

Except perhaps one. At the start of my fourth year at Emanuel, having opted for the “Arts” stream, I was required to choose between German and

born around 1948). To submit anything short of perfect homework was to doom yourself to a roaring tirade from a wildly gyrating head of angry gray hair, before meekly accepting hours of detention and additional grammatical exercises.

We were terrified of Joe—and yet we adored him. Every time he entered the room, his clanking, bony limbs preceding those baleful, piercing eyes atop a shivering torso, we would fall expectantly silent. There was no praise, no warm fuzzy familiarity or softening of the critical blow. He strode to his desk, slammed down books, flung himself at the blackboard (or else flung the chalk at some insufficiently attentive child), and gave us his all: fifty minutes of intensive, unremitting, undiluted language teaching. In Latin, we were still suffering through *The Gallic Wars*; in French, it had taken us five years to prepare for the national Ordinary Level examinations and learn to translate haltingly from Saint-Exupéry or some comparably accessible text. By halfway through my second year of German, Joe had us translating with consummate ease and real pleasure from Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*.

Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos



Playground of Hatfield Comprehensive, Hertfordshire, England, 1984

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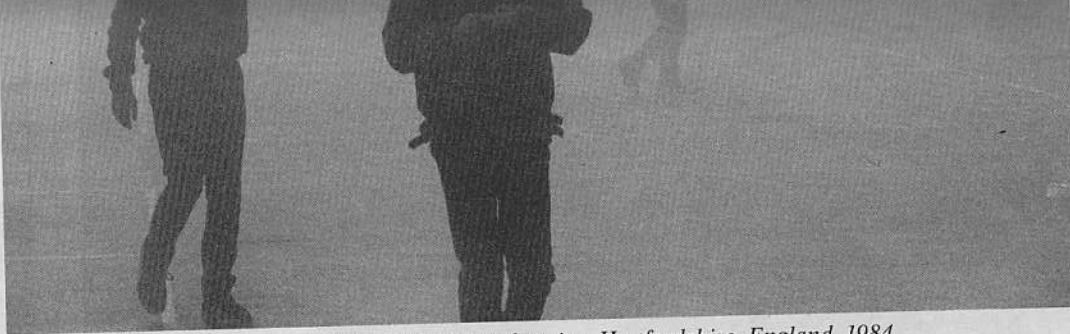
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But because most direct grant schools charged no tuition, and because they were usually day schools and thus drew largely upon local talent, their constituency was far down the social ladder from that of Winchester, Westminster, or Eton. Most boys at Emanuel came from the south London lower middle class, with a small number of working-class boys who had done well at the 11+ and a smattering of sons of stockbrokers, bankers, etc. from the outer suburbs who had chosen an inner-city day school over a conventional public school for boarders.

When I arrived in 1959, many of the teachers at Emanuel had been there since the end of World War I: the headmaster, the second master (whose prime responsibility was to oversee the weekly beating of insubordinate small boys by sixth-form prefects), the master of the lower school, and my first English master. The latter, who had arrived in 1920 but whose pedagogical techniques were unmistakably Dickensian, spent most of his time furiously twisting and tweaking the ears of his twelve-year-old pupils. I cannot recall a single thing that he said or that we read in the course of that year; just pain.

The younger teachers were better. Over the years I was reasonably well taught in English literature and mathematics, satisfactorily instructed in history, French, and Latin, and monotonously drilled in nineteenth-century science (if someone had only exposed us to modern biological and physical theories I might have been hungry for



Playground of Hatfield Comprehensive, Hertfordshire, England, 1984

the Lee Enfield rifle (already obsolete when it was issued to British servicemen in 1916). For nearly five years I went to school each Tuesday in a cut-down World War I British army uniform, enduring the amused stares of fellow commuters and the suppressed giggles of girls on the street. All day we would sit sweltering in our battle dress, only to parade pointlessly around the cricket pitch at the end of classes, harried and bullied by our "sergeants" (older boys) and barked at by "officers" (teachers in uniform enthusiastically reliving their military service at our expense). The whole experience would have put me in mind of Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk*, had anyone had the wit to point me in that direction.

I was sent to Emanuel because my elementary school headmistress had neglected to prepare me for the entrance examination to St. Paul's, the truly first-rate "public" day school to which my most promising contemporaries were admitted. I don't believe I ever told my mother or father just how unhappy I was at school, except once or twice to relate the endemic anti-Semitism: in those days there were very few "ethnic" minorities in London and Jews were the most visible outsiders. We numbered only ten or so in a school of well over one thousand pupils, and frequent low-level anti-Jewish slurs and name-calling were not particularly frowned upon.

I escaped thanks to King's. In my Cambridge entrance examinations I

ancient Greek. Along with everyone else I had been studying French and Latin since my first year; but at the age of fourteen I was deemed ready for "serious" language study. Without giving the matter too much thought I opted for German.

At Emanuel in those days the German language was taught by Paul Craddock: "Joe" to three generations of schoolboys. A gaunt, misanthropic survivor of some unspecified wartime experience—or at least, this was how we accounted for his unpredictable temper and apparent lack of humor. As it happened, Joe had a truly sardonic sense of the absurd, and he was—as I would later learn—a deeply humane person. But his external appearance—all six feet of him, from oversized brogues to unkempt, thinning hair—was terrifying to teenage boys: an invaluable pedagogical asset.

In just two years of intensive German study, I achieved a high level of linguistic competence and confidence. There was nothing mysterious about Joe's teaching methods. We learned by spending hours every day on grammar, vocabulary, and style, in the classroom and at home. There were daily tests of memory, reasoning, and comprehension. Mistakes were ruthlessly punished: to get less than eighteen out of twenty on a vocabulary test was to be "Gormless!" Imperfect grasp of a complicated literary text marked you "Dim as a Toc-H lamp!" (a World War II reference that still meant something—just—to a cohort of teenagers

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Despite being one of the (relatively) weaker students in his class—thanks to a distracting interest in Zionism—I did better in O-Level German than in all but one of my other subjects (and much better than I was to do in French or history), securing the second-to-top grade. Joe was characteristically disappointed: he could see

no reason why any boy taught German by him should not come top in the country. I dropped German in June 1964. Forty-five years later, I still speak the language passably well, albeit with short-lived memory lapses if I neglect it for too long. I wish I could say the same of other languages I have subsequently learned.

Joe would be impossible today. It is fortunate for him that he was not obliged to earn his living teaching in a modern high school—he was infamously politically incorrect, even by the standards of the age. Understanding full well that the only credible challenge to his monopoly of our attention would be the attractions of the opposite sex, he was brutally dismissive of nascent libidos: "If ye want te play with girls, don't waste my time! You can 'av 'em any time; but this is yer only chance to learn this language and you can't do both. If I even see ye with a girl, yer out of 'ere!" There was only one boy in our class who actually *had* a girlfriend; he was so terrified that Joe might learn of her existence that the poor thing was forbidden to approach within two miles of the school.

Nowadays, almost no one is even taught German. The consensus appears to be that the young mind can handle but one language at a time, preferably the easiest. In American high schools, no less than in Britain's egregiously underperforming comprehensive schools, students are urged to

believe that they have done well—or at least the best they could. Teachers are discouraged from distinguishing among their charges: it is simply not done to do as Joe did and praise first-rate work while damning the lesser performers. Rarely are pupils advised that they are “absolute rubbish!” or “the scum of the earth!”

Fear is at a discount—as is the satisfaction to be had from sheer, unrelenting linguistic effort. Joe never actually laid a hand on a boy throughout his long teaching career; indeed, his classroom was next to the public baths employed by the homoerotically disposed second master as a beating ground and he never made any secret of his contempt for the practice. But his successful deployment of physical intimidation and moral humiliation (“Yer utterly useless!”) would be unavailable to any teacher today, even if he or she were alert enough to know how to exploit it.

It seems to me significant that in all my unpleasant memories of school, the one unambiguous positive is the two years I spent having the German language driven mercilessly into me. I don't think I am a masochist. If I recall “Joe” Craddock with such affection and appreciation, it is not just because he put the fear of God in me or had me parsing German sentences at 1 AM lest I be dismissed the next day as “absolute rubbish!” It's because he was the best teacher I ever had; and being well taught is the only thing worth remembering from school. □

Bedder

I grew up without servants. This is hardly surprising: in the first place, we were a small, lower-middle-class family, who lived in small, lower-middle-class housing. Before the war, such families could typically afford a maid and perhaps a cook as well. The real middle

Oxbridge students, so it was held, were incapable of handling such subaltern tasks: because they had never undertaken them, but also because their aspirations and interests elevated them beyond such concerns. Moreover, and perhaps above all, the bedder was responsible for keeping an eye on the moral condition of her charge (scouts in Oxford were occasionally male, though less so by the 1960s, but bedders in my experience were always women).

I arrived in Cambridge in 1966, by which time the institution of the bedder and the responsibilities placed upon her, though not yet anachronistic, sat in some tension with rapidly shifting cultural mores. In King's, at least, a

around our feet, her plump contours within reach of our adolescent imaginings but otherwise untouchable, we did our best to mimic gentlemen of leisure, slumped carelessly in our armchairs over coffee and newspaper.

The bedder was not fooled of course, nor were we—though both parties had an interest in pretending otherwise. The class inhibition (not to mention the risk of unemployment) would have sufficed to constrain the woman. As for the undergraduate, even if he had no firsthand experience of this sort of relationship, the sociocultural learning curve was remarkably steep. By the end



A Cambridge bedder, 1939

Bedders, of course, even turning twenty entirely. Like the college pleased to be a ministrative staff, they had been in their post longer than their employers. Coming from farming or working-class stock, they were also far more morally conservative than the intellectual and professional middle class over whom they exercised informal guardianship and to whom they reported. Caught between naughty young men and their lenient superiors, the bedders of previous decades could fall back on moral convention and public opinion.

But in the Sixties the old rules did not apply—or at least were becoming unenforceable. And so a new set of unstated accords began to emerge, rather like the informal terms on which late-era Communist states were constrained to survive: we pretend to conform and you pretend to believe us. I don't suppose that there were many of us, even by 1968, who would have had the effrontery to present our bedder with not just the evidence of a young lady's presence but the young lady herself. On the other hand, we no longer felt it necessary to strive officiously to cover up our tracks: the occasional item of female attire, or other evidence of overnight companionship, carried scant risk of official censure. We acted as though the bedder supposed us to be living monkishly contemplative lives, and the bedder—complicit and mildly amused—did nothing to disabuse us.

Indeed, the only time I caused my bedder any trouble was the night when I—uncharacteristically and for reasons I no longer recall—returned to my room blind drunk, collapsed onto my bed...and woke up in a pool of vomit. Next morning, my bedder, an elderly veteran named Rose, took in the situation with a wordless glance and went to work. Within two hours, I was clean, dressed, and in my armchair, coffee to hand and sputtering with embarrassment. Rose, in cool command, returned my bed and its surroundings