

CHAPTER 1

First Steps

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap. Well, you've come to the right place.

*Adapted from *Catcher in the Rye* by J D Salinger*

The very first thing you ought to know is that the very title of the book is a bluff. Well, that's right and proper for a work about poker. The fact is that poker has never been so central to my life, that I would ever think of it as occupying my thoughts all day every day. On learning of this project, a friend of mine, Cathy Rogers, said recently that my autobiography should be called 'Chess and Poker 24/7'. Well, it isn't exactly an autobiography, and also few readers would be interested in both topics. We have all met people who are obsessed with one subject. There is nothing terribly wrong with that and it doesn't necessarily make the person a nerd.

I pity the person who has never found even one topic which was of abiding interest.

But the game of poker is a somewhat narrow field you know. Also, I

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must admit, the general public's attitude to the game has affected me over the past 50 years. They have about ten fainting fits and become glassy-eyed when they realise I'm not kidding when I say I make my living playing poker. For me the first reason for playing poker is to enjoy myself, and the second to make money. It isn't much good if you don't then go out and spend it.

In 1990 I was playing poker at the Victoria Casino in London. As I left one evening I told the players that I was going away on holiday to Australia for some weeks. Mansour Matloubi, at that time World Champion, asked me, 'Why go away when the game is here?' 'What do you think is the point of playing poker?' I enquired. He was puzzled, 'Don't you know? It is in order to make money to play poker.' There is some truth that the competitive joy of winning is a large part of why we play poker, but perhaps that bulked even larger in Mansour's life at that time than in mine.

Err. I presume you realise it was not ever thus. I did not suddenly, at the age of nine, wake up and think, 'I'll become a professional poker player.' I imagine though that I was always a logical child. My sister Rose told me that when she was very young she thought the film actors were playing their parts behind the screen. I am 4½ years younger, 'How could she have thought this,' I thought, 'Films are shown in several cinemas simultaneously.' I was around about nine years old when I made a conscious decision never to have a cigarette. It was clearly, dirty, unhealthy, expensive and I was assured by my Aunt Marie that it was difficult to give up. She made me promise, with a cigarette in her hand, never to smoke. This seemed to me like a no-brainer; if I never tried it, I would never know what I was missing. I have never had any patience with people who say that nobody was aware how damaging smoking was until the 1970s. The evidence was all there in your chest, from passive smoking. Interestingly enough, Brian, a cousin, came to a similar conclusion at a similar age, although we never discussed the matter at the time.

Social habits have changed dramatically in the past half century. In our family it was normal for friends and relatives to come round for dinner, and then for card games to be played in which everybody could participate. These were normally simple gambling games such as 'chase the ace' or 'Newmarket'; and it was normal for the children to be involved. Rather nice that, but you don't give it any thought at the time. Children

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just accept whatever as the norm. Nowadays we all tend to wander off and watch TV, play computer games or split up into smaller groups.

I found that I had to revise this and have added the following. Recently at a family get-together I played Monopoly with my nephew Hylton and his daughter Georgia, and my other nephew Nigel and his son Ben. That is the first time that I can ever remember doing that. They would never have considered playing a game for money. In fact, my then nine-year-old great nephew, Joe, said he didn't like the idea of gambling. 15-year-old Ben, on the other hand, is attracted by the idea of poker. With the amount currently on television, this is hardly surprising. Then I remembered that about 25 years ago when I reached my senses and gave up having a day job, Hylton asked me, 'But what happens when you start losing?' A good question, which is addressed later in this book.

I recently had the opportunity to quiz other people of my generation about whether they played the gambling games 50-60 years ago. It turned out that the same customs applied in my brother-in-law Gerald's social circle, but not in the others. A small survey, but it seems that it was not part of a general Jewish society.

Rose was rather dismissive of the amounts we played for, 2½d, the equivalent today of about 30p, was the usual total sum wagered. I disagree with her; gambling shows a certain attitude to life, whether it is for thousands of pounds or pennies. A friend of mine, who prefers to remain nameless, is intrigued by the idea of poker, but would never consider playing for money. The whole concept of gambling is alien to him. In due course I graduated to more skilful games like 'rummy', 'solo' or 'klabberjass'; all games of skill. But our story really begins with 'brag'.

Brag

Brag is a three-card game with a betting structure akin, but not identical to poker. Each player is dealt three cards and there is just betting on the value of the hands. There are no card changes at all.

There are some rather odd anomalies about the order of merit of the hands. Three of a kind (trips) beats a straight flush – although it is more difficult to get the latter. Also trip threes is the best hand, not trip aces, and 3-2-A is a higher straight than A-K-Q. Well, these are only idiosyncrasies, but one does wonder how they came about.

My daddy used to give me the money to play against him. I was allowed to keep the winnings. I was too young to appreciate it at the time,

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but I have never since had such a sweet deal. Sad to say, I cannot remember whether, at the age of nine, I played against adults other than my father; certainly my mummy Ann didn't join in, nor, it occurs to me, did Rose. However, we normally played head-up. I guess I am probably unique in playing my first poker one-on-one rather than against several opponents.

Eventually I was dealt the magical trip threes. It is about 5500/1 against being dealt that. All the money went in. Has my memory romanticised it, or did he really have trip aces? That would have been about 25 million to 1 against.

My daddy got pretty grumpy. He said something like, 'Since you know you are winning, you are supposed to show your cards and not try to win more. But I'll let you keep the money.' Later I learnt that he was quite correct, that is the etiquette of the situation. But it was like scales falling from my eyes. There was something in life that I understood better than my much revered father. That the whole idea of the game was to take no prisoners and get the lot.

Going Racing

I still remember the very first horse-race I saw when my father took me to the track at the age of 11. Recently I discussed this with Rose and she said she had never attended a race meeting as a youngster. Was this sexism or simply to do with availability? Now we'll never know. I was very keen on Arctic exploration at the time. A horse called 'Shackleton' was running in the first race of the day. I was naturally taken with its chances and told my father so. Of course, he bet on a different horse. 'What does it mean, if we had bet 2 shillings (1/10 of a pound) on Shackleton at 20/1?' I asked. 'No, you couldn't get more than 12/1,' he retorted. Well, I knew better and had guessed that 20/1 was quite a big number. I doubt it took more than a couple of races to twig that it meant we would have won £2 (\$8 in those days). Not a fortune, but £8 a week was a living wage in 1950 and I think my weekly pocket money was 6d (1/40 of a pound).

I wish I could tell that by the time I was 11 years old, I had a keen grasp of odds and value for money in gambling. Like most people, it was only much later that I started to get a feel for these things. I liked the idea of a flutter and still more winning. But I wasn't aware until much later that some bets are good value and others are to be avoided.

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I continued going to the races off and on until my father died in 1968. It was a fascinating scene. I was never very much concerned about the actual race. In fact my parents used to like to go the cheapest way possible, and that often resulted in a very poor view of the action. I was more interested in shopping around for the best price. In England there are bookmakers who compete for your business and therefore sometimes offer you a better deal on a particular horse. I doubt today they would be allowed to take a bet from a 12-year-old in shorts. Listening to the tipsters was fun; although I quickly learnt that they were no better at predicting winners than my fancying a horse because of its name. Observing the crowds and their somewhat raffish good humour was great fun.

Oddly enough, most of the poker players I know are not avid racegoers. Rose and my brother-in-law Gerald Gilbey also stopped going. Indeed Rose clearly intensely dislikes the whole idea of gambling. Thus I drifted out of the habit of attending race meetings; a pity really. It became impossible to bet at betting shops in Britain, even if I used a slightly more than somewhat scientific betting system than liking the name of a horse. The Government introduced a tax of 10% on the total return from a wager. This was totally iniquitous and, although they have now removed it, I could no longer consider such betting. You bet £100 at even money. Now you win and the return was £180. Thus the effect for a relative short price was that the tax was 20%. You note, it is still just as central to my thinking, that it is important to get the best price for whatever purchase I am making. One day, we were expecting to go to the theatre to see 'Peter Pan'. Only very expensive seats were left (we always bought the cheapest). My parents turned to me and asked, 'Do you really want to spend all that money?' Dutiful child that I was then, I replied, 'It isn't that important.' Memory may have failed me, but I think I have still never seen that show on the stage.

In our family, the biggest sin was paying retail.

Woody Allen

Israel Reuben

My father was a mild, unassuming man. He and my mother Ann were both born in England, all of their parents having come from Minsk. A few years before her death my mother told me that my father, usually known as Sid, asked her whether his father could borrow the money they

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had been saving for their wedding. The purpose was to help set up a bakery. My mother said, 'Well, if that is what you want. But then I won't marry you.' Fortunately, from my viewpoint, my father saw reason. My father told me that he had discussed with a friend of his whether to buy a house. He told me they decided to have Stewart instead. It is these types of decision that affect our lives, not whether to call with the second best flush.

Sid was first of all a tailor and, when he could not make a living at that, became a taxi driver. I was born in March 1939, six months before the outbreak of the Second World War. He spent much of the War in the army. Thus I seldom saw him in this period. Rose tells me that, when he was coming home on leave, this had to be kept from me, otherwise I would become overexcited. Most of the War he was stationed in England, but at its end went to Belgium and Germany. As he left, my mother was in inconsolable floods of tears. I stood on a chair, trying to comfort her, 'But mummy, daddy has often had to go away before.' Of course I was too young to understand the difference between England and a foreign country, but you should note the logical analysis of the situation, that is so necessary in poker.

Finally the great day arrived when he was due home. My mother confided to my aunt Esther about me, 'It's so long since he saw Sid that he will probably think he is an uncle.' Ridiculous I thought, 'I know my daddy.' When he came in I ran towards him shouting, 'Uncle, uncle!' Mummy said, 'See, I told you so.' My toes still curl up at the embarrassment of that moment.

As was usual for his generation, Sid was not well educated, but this does not by any means imply that he was stupid or uncultured. Like all drivers of black taxis, he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the geography of London. He liked to read plays, as well as going to the theatre. I have never before thought about why he never got around to playing poker. We certainly played for small enough stakes in the beginning. It is one of my great regrets that he died in 1968, six years before my first book, *The Chess Scene*, was published. He would have helped make it a superior work.