

“A FAMILY OF READERS”

Bruce Sarbit

*“Show me a family of readers,
and I will show you the people who move the world.”¹*

Our friend, Barb, called to ask if we had received an invitation to Simon's *Bar Mitzvah*. We had. Never one to mince words, Barb insisted that we attend. And, why? Because she said, based on her experience of him as a student, Simon was "just like his (deceased) great-uncle, Sidney." Barb and my wife, Celia, had attended *Talmud Torah* School in the same grade and class as Sidney. And, as a Teaching Assistant at the Grey Academy Jewish School, Barb had gotten to know Simon well.

Simon apparently looked a lot like his namesake great-uncle. More importantly Barb knew him to be similarly bright and inquisitive. And, the clincher: Barb said that Simon read books on a broad range of subjects with the same kind of vigour and intensity with which Sidney had read.

The Gallises (formerly Galsky) came to Canada from White Russia (now Belarus) in 1920, just after the Russian Revolution and after the Bolsheviks, led by many Jews (in fact, Jews were in the great majority of the Bolshevik leaders), including Trotsky, had assumed power in the U.S.S.R.

I have always imagined that my grandfather, Phillip, was probably excited by the possibilities of a Communist government. While he wasn't particularly political in my memory, he remained committed to communist principles. Why else would he have sent my mother to the Communist/Socialist Jewish Worker's School, the Arbeiter Ring? Perhaps further evidence: by chance, I found the name "Gailiss," (note the different spelling) there with the sixty others, including Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev, 43 of them Jewish, on the 1917-18 list of the U.S.S.R.'s Communist Party "Central Party Members."

¹ *Napoleon Bonaparte*

But, things must have turned sour. Mom — the second youngest of five children (Sophie, Oscar and Ruth were older than her; Max was younger) — remembered fleeing from the Cossacks who shot at them as they crossed the border out of the U.S.S.R. She hid under a blanket in the back of a cart.

Phillip had been a horse-trader and Singer Sewing machine salesman/repairman before they left the U.S.S.R., so opening a grocery store was a natural option for him when they reached Canada and Winnipeg. For many, many years, until the mid-1960s, they owned and operated a small store in north Winnipeg at the southeast corner of Mountain Avenue and McKenzie Street. Oscar and Max both worked for their father until he decided to sell the store.

The Gallis's, Jewish to the core, were truly "people of the Book" — the *Torah* — as well as (small "b") books of all kinds. When in his late eighties, short years before he passed away, Zaida Phillip proudly told me that he had learned to read English. He was already fluent, able to speak and read in seven other languages, all learned in his youth. During his 50 years in Canada, although Yiddish remained his language of choice, he had learned to speak English well enough. Reading was a different story. He'd been too busy running his store to learn to read the country's primary language. Now, in retirement, he had the time. And, while he didn't "need" to read English, he'd decided to learn to do so anyway.

But, how, without access to formal instruction, without computers (they were years away!) and language programs such as Duolingo, did he do it? My wife, Celia, a teacher of English-as-a-Second Language, would undoubtedly approve of his method.

On his gauche — lime-green, orange and pink — but otherwise pleasant, front porch, one lovely summer Sunday, he demonstrated his newly developed reading skills. Slowly, but efficiently, in his Yiddish-accented English, he read aloud articles on the front page of The Winnipeg Tribune, the city's leftist newspaper.

Zaida had diligently and repeatedly watched dozen and dozens of television advertisements and written down their key words. Over a lengthy period of time, his mind, no doubt, numbed by 1960s ads for products such as Ivory Soap, Kool-Aid, Corn Flakes, and Kraft Dinner, he had compiled a list of words that included all of the 26 letters in most of their English incarnations. He had, then, over and over again, read and

said aloud the words of the lengthy list, emulating the pronunciation in the ads. Zaida, then, found the same words in ads in the newspaper. From ads, he progressed to newspaper articles, practiced and practiced until he could read and glean the information in them.

While his skills in English grew by leaps and bounds, prayers in Hebrew remained his major reading focus. In the strictly men's section of the *Talmud Torah* synagogue on the Jewish High Holidays, surrounded by old men wrapped in prayer shawls, chanting and mumbling, rocking to and fro to the mysterious language, the Hebrew of the *Machzor* (the prayer book) for *Rosh Hashanah*.

I would sit between Zaida and Uncle Oscar, each of us with our own *Machzor*, trying desperately, but failing time and again, to read quickly enough to keep pace with them. What made it even more frustrating was the fact that, despite my Hebrew lessons in preparation for my *Bar Mitzvah*, coupled with my great desire to understand what I was reading, it was mostly gibberish to me.

So, I would flip to the back of the book (the back being the front of an English language book) where some of the prayers, often poems, sometimes songs, were in English or Hebrew-in-English-transliteration. I think both Zaida and Uncle Oscar knew why I had flipped pages, and probably sympathized with me in some measure. Nonetheless, wanting me to be a part of the congregation, to be "on the same page" as themselves and the others, they'd very gently take the book from my hands and change the page to accord with theirs. I'd nod my thanks as if they had done me a great favour and valiantly attempt once more to read the Hebrew. I'd mumble words from time to time, I'd turn pages whether or not I had finished reading them. In essence, I'd pretend to be reading at the same pace as them.

My hand goes, with a will of its own, to Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra." On my shelf for forty-five years, until now, I've not read it. It was, originally, Sidney's book, given to me to keep for him shortly before he died. Now, I think of it as his gift to me.

Sidney's books. My shelves are filled with them. All of the Marx, some of the Freud and the better part of the drama section, the literature of *Kaballah* and Jewish

mysticism. Much of the existential literature and almost all of the Nietzsche, including "Thus Spake Zarathustra," once belonged to Sidney.

Sidney grew up surrounded by books, thousands and thousands of them. I can picture his father, my Uncle Max, sitting, reading, in the midst of family gatherings, oblivious to the hubbub around him. Sidney's sister, Brenda (who has penned three novels) always surrounded herself with multitudes of volumes. Our cousin, Naomi, majored in English Lit, and with her lawyer husband, Jack Chapman, lined her study as well as her bedroom walls with magazines and books, both fiction and nonfiction. Their son, Arthur, continues the tradition.

Until her eyesight and will to read (and live!) were severely compromised by a stroke that impacted her mobility and speech, my mother was a voracious reader. Once a week, while I was young enough not to have to work, old enough to go on my own, she sent me to the Selkirk Public Library to pick up books for her, and for myself. She also subscribed to the monthly Readers Digest Condensed Books, four novels in their handsome, leather-bound volumes, read them immediately on their arrival.

Just as impressive as the numbers of books was the intensity with which the Gallis's read. Consider Uncle Oscar, poor, sweet Uncle Oscar, diagnosed schizophrenic. Now, while he had a small number of books compared to his siblings and relatives, Oscar considered them his most valued possessions. Judging by their condition, he had vigorously poured over and through them.

The intensity with which Oscar read might well have been responsible for his condition. Based on his reading and his interpretations, he reached the conclusion that he was the Messiah. And, when he declared it publicly, Oscar found himself in an argument and, then, a fight with a fellow who was convinced he was the Messiah, in his case, the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Oscar landed in jail. My father, in the middle of the night, was called to bail him out. While the charges were dismissed, Uncle Oscar was undeterred from his fanatical mission. He continued to profess, as inviolably true, grandiose ideas.

While his formal education ended before his teens when the family migrated to Canada, Oscar, nonetheless, even as he worked long hours in the family grocery store, learned to read and write in English on his own. In the time leading up to his messianic

confrontation and brawl, he declared himself to be a philosopher, one intimately familiar with leftist political treatises and religious philosophy. And, in some ways, he was!

No one else would give him the time of day when he wanted to talk philosophy. Certainly not his father, Phillip, with whom he lived. Not his brother and sisters including my sympathetic and loving mother. And, definitely not my practical and realistic father who had little patience with people with "screwball" ideas.

But, when his nephews would visit -- my brother and I only on Sundays, Sidney much more often since he lived only a few blocks away -- Oscar would hustle us, involuntary students, into his tiny bedroom, seat us on the chair beside his bed and, using his chest of drawers as a lectern, begin to deliver long, well-rehearsed lectures. I can't speak for the others, but I was certainly too young and naive to appreciate their importance, much less ask intelligent questions about them.

I vaguely remember trying to grasp one obtuse, but still brilliant, lecture on "relative absolutism" and "absolute relativism." To this day, 60+ years on, despite having taken philosophy courses, despite having done oodles of reading on such things, even having attempted to read the book from which he drew the lecture,² I have only a vague idea what he was saying.

And, then, there was the lecture on *Gematria* (*Torah*, analyzed, letter-by-letter), the one he delivered several times, always with identical flare and finesse. Here, for effect, he'd wildly gesticulate, there, he'd pound the chest of drawers, always at precisely the same point in the lecture. Here, coloured by many years, is my attempt to capture his lecture:

"Not only do the words of Torah give a divine message, but they also have a far greater message that extends beyond them. Even as small a mark as a *kotzo shel yod* on the smallest letter was put there by God to teach us lessons (he'd pound the chest of drawers)! We'll start with the letter *Beit*, the number 2 in *Gematria*. And, why *Beit*? Because it's also the first letter of the first word of the *Torah* -- *B'reshet* -- we know that *Torah* has two parts, two: the Written and the Oral. Both (he'd point at the book and his mouth) are needed. Studying one and not the other is like trying to

² Fred Casey, *Method in Thinking: A Series of Popular Lectures*. Manchester, 1933.

walk on only one leg, like hopping (he'd hop). The second letter of *B'resheet*, *resh*, means 'beginning', which, of course, is what *B'resheet* is, the start of the *Torah*. But, it also means 'head' or 'top', which is where you have to start to learn. With your '*kop*,' your head (he'd knock my head). Because the third letter, *shin*, is the twenty-first letter of the *alef-beit* (he would do the *alef-bet*, counting on his fingers), it has the root numbers 3 and 7. What's 3 times 7? (He wouldn't wait for an answer) 21! So, why are 3 and 7 important? Because 3 is the number for 'God,' and 7 is the number for 'Time'. So, *shin* means God will come at the appointed time, not before, not after. Only when everything is ready. The "*yud*" ... "

Uncle Oscar was fully prepared to work his way through the whole of the *Torah*, all five books of it, letter-by-letter. At some level, I was actually excited by the theatre being played out in front of me. But by the time he got to the third word, I was absolutely numb.

His sister, my Mom, had brought me up to be a respectful, well-mannered child. So, I pretended to listen, feigned understanding of what he was saying and nodded vigorously in agreement. And, then, when she, knowing I was in agony, said that we had to go, I concealed my glee, and faked my disappointment.

*"I know of no better life purpose than to perish
in attempting the great and the impossible..."³*

But, even Uncle Oscar's reading paled before the intensity with which Sidney, from an early age, reinforced by Uncle Oscar's enthusiasm, approached the philosophical and Judaic texts foisted upon him by excited teachers at the Talmud Torah Synagogue School

It was rare, remarkable and brilliant, but, at the same time, somewhat disconcerting, to watch. While I had a modicum of his intensity myself, and even envied his passion, I was too socialized, too balanced in that way to take it to the extremes that Sidney did. Where he spent his time outside school either reading the *Babylonian*

³ *Nietzsche, unpublished note from 1873*

Talmud, *halacha* summaries and commentaries, and in talking to Uncle Oscar, I played baseball and golf when I wasn't working at my father's grocery store. When I read, it was either "The Hardy Boys," sports stories or comics. My serious reading was the history of the Canadian Football League, in particular, the exploits of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.⁴

Perhaps books deepened and expanded Sidney's sense of life, served as his way into the world. Perhaps through reading and connection with the book's characters, he found a way to decrease his sense of isolation, a path to connect with others.

But, others saw things in a different light. Reading, they thought, if done to excess, even with the obvious rewards, could have serious pitfalls. Sidney's all-consuming passion for books, his parents and sister concluded, was unnatural, potentially harmful, a serious concern because it was insulating him from the world.

In an effort to encourage socialization, they gave him "normal" kid things, things they thought would "relax" him: musical instruments, Time-Life books, hockey tickets, comic books, and tickets to the Harlem Globetrotters for his birthday. Anything deemed "normal" for boys his age was encouraged.

Their efforts floundered; nothing worked. He always returned to his intense study of the *Talmud*.

If you can't beat-'em, join-'em, they figured. He was sent in his early teens to a Yeshiva in Skokie, Illinois. There, with rabbis as his teachers, he studied *Ivrit* (Hebrew), *Torah* – (*Chumash* and Commentaries), *Nach* (Prophets and Writings), *Gemara* (*Talmud*), *Halachah* (Jewish law), and *Hashkafah* (Jewish Thought and Ethics).

Sidney, in his element, debated the fine points of *Torah* with Judaic scholars, went deeper and deeper into Talmudic interpretations, deeper and deeper into himself.

I had infrequently seen Sidney at family gatherings. But, even when he attended, I thought of him, four years my junior, as a "little" cousin. I hadn't gotten to know him well.

At the compact University of Winnipeg, joined to its Collegiate, during the last year of my Bachelor's degree, we occasionally bumped into each other in the hall near

⁴ Tony Allen, *Grey Cup or Bust*.

"Tony's," everyone's favourite coffee shop. One day, making small talk, I asked him why he had left the *yeshiva*.

It was "restricting," he answered straightaway. While his studies of *Talmud* had been gratifying, he felt that insufficient attention had been paid to *Kabbalah*, the path of contemplative Jewish practices. He wanted to learn practices that aimed to help an individual pinpoint, break through and overcome, psychological barriers hindering efforts to live up to the commandments, barriers obstructing the flow of "inner light."

Sidney had, somehow, come to recognize that what *Kabbalah* addresses is universal, not restricted to Judaism and Jews, that what gifts it offers can be of value to all people. So, when he was seventeen, having exhausted what he thought could be gained from studies at the *yeshiva*, but more to the point, wanting more,

Sidney returned to Winnipeg to complete high school and university and, maybe more important, to begin his own program of studies and self-development. In the final year of my degree at the same small institution, I happened to bump into him on the stairs outside the library. Sidney showed me a list of seven hundred and twenty books. He aimed, he claimed, as he shared the list with me, to read the whole lot -- seven hundred and twenty books -- in two years. Do the math, that's almost a book-a-day!

I, myself, now a more serious reader, was a regular in the stacks of the library, especially the psychology and philosophy sections. And, I was never without a reading list, almost always comprised of texts and research materials for course assignments. But, I had never seen anything like the list he showed me (in fact, I still haven't), pages and pages of it. Granted, my quick survey suggested that it included some "lighter" reading -- science fiction and fantasy --, but it was mostly made up of weighty and dense works: classic literature and drama, science, history, psychology and philosophy. Nietzsche, lots of Nietzsche.

When I recovered from a cursory scan of the list, I asked how far he had gotten, expecting him to say that he had just begun, figuring that he'd soon abandon the project the way I usually do my New Year's resolutions. But, no, Sidney declared rather matter-of-factly, that he was more than halfway through his list, having read, on average, a book-a-day for a year.

Visions of him taking, then applying, the methods of Evelyn Woods speed-reading courses flashed through my mind. And, the cynic in me wondered if he had just scanned the books' tables of contents, or read their back covers, or if he had done what I occasionally did: read the Coles Notes versions of the books. Again, no. He had read, he assured me, the whole book, cover-to-cover, in each and every case.

Sidney had decided, he told me, to explore and understand nothing less than the whole world of thought, Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, of religion, philosophy, literature, art and science! Moreover, his goal was not understanding for its own sake, but understanding so that he might, then, create his own works. The process was underway, and it seemed, there'd be no stopping him.

What drove him to read at such an incredible and unrelenting pace? He explained: Damocles' sword hung by an ever-so-thin thread above his neck. If ever he wavered, if ever he stopped reading, the sword would fall and instantly "kill" him.

In 1976, eight years later, I returned home to Manitoba. Sidney had completed his Bachelor's degree in Philosophy. He hadn't stopped reading, in fact, had worked his way through several more equally formidable lists. And he had reached a point, a level of understanding, where he could confidently begin the projects he held dear: philosophy papers and books, a novel, a play and, unexpectedly, a musical piece.

Earning his living as a cab driver, Sidney, between fares, could listen to recorded cassette tapes of the CBC "Ideas" radio show. Making too little money to make ends meet and to keep his two bedroom apartment, he decided to move into a less expensive, bachelor suite so that he might save money and, then, travel the world. He would have to part with a hefty portion of his library of some six thousand books and a harpsichord(!).

He developed a "five-year plan," asked his sister, Brenda, to keep 3,500 of his books. And, much to my surprise, he asked me to keep another 2,500 of them until, following his travels abroad, he could afford a space large enough to accommodate them.

Selfishly thrilled to have and read the books he'd entrust to me, I immediately said "yes," and brought home to our little gingerbread house in Portage la Prairie about one hundred liquor store boxes of books as well as the bricks and boards to hold them.

I removed the books from their boxes, excitedly thumbing through each one before placing it, by genre, on the shelf. By far the largest collections were of great literature and philosophy. But, there were also hundreds of history, drama, science and psychology books, science-fiction and fantasy.

I saw, I felt, first-hand, physical evidence of Sidney's reading intensity. Many of the books were worn and tattered, some beyond salvation, their covers worn and cracked; pages yellowed and corners were turned back. They were ready to fall apart from excessive use. Some were so decimated by Sidney's reading habits that even a charity used book mart would have judged them unfit for sale and thrown them out, but only after wary volunteers donned rubber gloves for protection.

Many were filled with a fierce underlining and near-unreadable marginalia, exclamation marks and hastily scrawled one word comments: "Yes!," "No!," "Wow!" and "N.B." Everything, all the marginalia, reflected Sidney's compulsion to read quickly and deeply.

Nietzsche might have been Sidney's favourite. I thumb through "Thus Spake Zarathustra," am struck by the hastily, zealously scrawled check marks and underlining. I stop at random and read a section surrounded by brackets, beside which are double check marks (✓✓):

["The most concerned ask today: 'How is man to be preserved?' But, I, Zarathustra, am the first and only one to ask: 'How is man to be overcome?'"]

I wonder: should I see the question as that which may have affected, perhaps governed and shaped, Sidney's life?

Several pages on, madly underlined and, this time, with three check marks: (✓✓✓)

"All great love does not want love: it wants more."

Yes, that sounds right. Sidney wanted more.

The books that had prompted the most intense marginalia and use were usually those in the philosophy section. But, that doesn't tell the full story. They were philosophy books that had taken a stance, that had assumed a position, that dared to proselytize and promote, that proposed powerful and challenging ways of thinking and living. They were books by or about Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Marx and Freud, Montaigne, Goethe and Dante, Hegel and Camus.

Following his father's, Zaida Phillip's, death (at 89) December 2, 1970, Uncle Oscar lived alone in the house on Landsdowne. If I knew very little about him before then, I knew even less afterwards, partly because I was away at school and work, partly because once Zaida Phillip was gone, there was no compelling connection.

What I know is drawn from scant, piecemeal and largely second-hand evidence. When Oscar suffered a severe stroke in the late nineteen seventies, the house on Landsdowne was sold and the property (his and his deceased father's) was distributed within the family. I was given the dining room furniture (a grand oak table, chairs, hutch and the china cabinet that now graces Jared and Eva's dining room) and a couple of bottles of Slivovitz Plum Brandy from the two 12-bottle cases he had purchased. Apparently, he had, without company and anyone to look after him, been drinking heavily since his father's death. Perhaps, more likely probably, the drinking had precipitated the stroke.

I was also given a large box of Oscar's books. Insufficient excuse, but work and family kept me from opening the box. It remained in my garage both in Winnipeg for a year and, then, for the twenty-seven years during which we lived in Brandon. I had no idea of the box's contents. In fact, I forgot that I had it.

Sidney visited us in Portage La Prairie shortly after Celia and I were married. We happily scanned his well-shelved books that lined our walls, took some out and discussed those that were most dear to him.

Perhaps we had had a bit too much wine when Sidney offered to do a Tarot reading. Celia volunteered to have her cards read, and what transpired is etched in our memories

The same age, Sidney and Celia attended the *Talmud Torah Cheder* together in the same grade. And, while they had lived on the same street, Landsdowne, they were in different classes and ran in different circles. They “knew” each other, but barely.

We didn't have Tarot Cards, but that didn't phase Sidney. A regular deck of cards, he said, would do just as well. In fact, he announced, if push came to shove and he was in the right headspace, he could read pepper that had been spilt on the table.

Sidney's "reading" was uncannily and deeply accurate. He knew Celia's passions, he knew her temperament, he knew her loves and personality. He knew her, as they say, “inside-out,” knew things about her that even I, her spouse, her lover, her partner, hadn't previously known (but, from which I learned!).

Less than a year after having asked me to take the books, short months after his visit to Portage la Prairie, Sidney died. While returning from a trip to his girlfriend's home near Kenora in Lake of the Woods, as he pulled onto the highway, his car was hit by a bus. He died instantly.

He was interred at the *Shaarey Tzedek* Cemetery. On his headstone were carved these words, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "*Al be that he was a philosophre,*" taken from these lines:

*For he would rather have at bed's head
Twenty books, all bound in black or red,
Of Aristotle and his philosophy
Than rich robes, fiddle, or gay psaltery.
Yet, al be that he was a philosophre,
With little gold in his coffer.⁵*

Tragically, none of the papers, plays, music and the novel on which he had been working were found. No works were left for posterity. No tangible, recognizable legacy other than memories and, of course, the books. A scholarship at his *alma mater*, the University of Winnipeg was set up in his name by his parents, my Uncle Max and Aunt Marion,

"The Sidney Gallis Scholarship in Philosophy

⁵ *Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales: General Prologue, Lines 295-300.*

This scholarship will be awarded annually ... to a meritorious student continuing their studies."

He was also mentioned in the Jewish Foundation of Winnipeg's, "The Endowment Book of Life -- Growing for Life: Marion Gallis"

"The late Sidney Gallis attended Talmud Torah, Joseph Wolinsky Collegiate, high school yeshiva in Skokie, Illinois and the University of Winnipeg where he earned an honours philosophy degree. He was twenty-seven at the time of his death."

Sidney's sister, Brenda arranged for the University of Winnipeg Library to be given a massive number of books from among those that she had kept for him. They were placed in the "Sidney Gallis Collection." But, later, the Library chose to disperse them within the various sections of the library to which they belonged.

Most of his books have now been discarded by the Library and the others, those still housed, can only be found if one gets lucky and, then, only if one knows, as I do, what kind of marginalia — Sidney's scrawl — to look for. I recently borrowed from a "branch" of the University of Winnipeg Library (at the Canadian Mennonite University) a copy of Collins's "Existentialism." I am convinced that the extensive marginalia found within the book was penned by Sidney.

Sidney's family allowed me to keep the books he had asked me to save for his return. I cannot pass them on my shelves, at least those I still have, without thinking of him. And, then, I am, instantly, reminded of my need to read, and to live, with the same kind of passion that he did.

I see Sidney hunched over a text, oblivious to distraction, scribbling, underlining without ever losing the rhythm and pace of the read. I dream of us, over wine, discussing long into the night what had led him to scrawl particular marginalia, why, for instance, when Nietzsche said this or that, had he cheered or jeered, underlined or made check marks and drawn brackets, why he written so fervently in the margins.

When we were moving to Winnipeg, I had to clean out the garage. In its rafters, there for most of the 27 years we had lived in Brandon, was the huge box of books that had once belonged to my Uncle Oscar.

I managed to push the box from the rafters to the floor, setting off an incredible cloud of dust. When the air had cleared, I came down from the ladder and opened the box. Among Uncle Oscar's books were several volumes of political philosophy, a *Chumash (Torah)*, the book of philosophy from which one of his lectures had come (Fred Casey's "Method In Thinking"), and a particularly stinky Prayer Book (*Siddur*), the opening pages of which were filled with numbers I could not decipher and birthdays of all his family members.

Keen to share my "find," I rushed inside to show Celia. One whiff of the *Siddur*, she cringed and demanded that I throw it out.

I speak from experience: moves bring out the worst in people; they fight over what to keep, and what to throw out. We had undoubtedly had such arguments already that day and neither of us were up for another one. Besides, I couldn't help but agree with her. The book really did smell frightfully awful!

In the Jewish tradition, one is supposed to honour one's books, especially the holy ones, place them in a prominent location, dust them from time-to-time, keep them from excess moisture. The sages go so far as to recommend the use of traps to protect the books from destruction by rodents. They advise, no, they order, that if a book is accidentally shelved upside down, one is obliged to kiss it, then turn it right side up. Furthermore, one shouldn't shame a holy book by placing it on a bench on which one is sitting, or expose one's nakedness to it, or take it into a bathroom, much less, God forbid, throw it out.

I have, time and again, broken the rules, all of them, particularly the bathroom rule, without batting an eyelash, much less experiencing any remorse. Still, I am ashamed of what I did! I capitulated, without argument, to trashing the *Siddur*, made no effort to salvage it, did nothing to air out the fetid, malodorous tome. Straightaway, I took it to the communal recycling dumpster where I threw it in on top of the slew of empty containers, cans, bottles, boxes and newspapers.

The *Siddur*, to my utter surprise, opened to the page of the Mourner's Kaddish. I retrieved it, and then, ignoring atheistic principles, recited the Kaddish in memory of Uncle Oscar, and all the deceased relatives whose names, both Hebrew and English, and birthdays were scribbled in the margins of the pages: my grandfather, Phillip Gallis,

my grandmother after whom I am named, Breindel Gallis, my aunts, Sophie (Gallis) Romalis and Ruth (Gallis) Finkel, my uncle, Max Gallis, my mother, Rita Lillian (Gallis) Sarbit, and while it wasn't written there, Sidney.

I, then, gently placed the book in a small box, put it back in the dumpster and said "goodbye." Goodbye to the book, but not to the deceased relatives. I have not stopped saying their names.

Oscar's *Chumash* and twenty-two political philosophy volumes survived both physically and, remarkably, without the odour that had infused the *Siddur* and repulsed Celia.

Perhaps to appease the guilt I suffered for my treatment of the *Siddur* I donated the 22 books to the Brandon University Library, S. J. McKee Archives. Oscar's political philosophy books are housed in a special collection.

"Title: Oscar Gallis Collection Date Range: 1910-1935

Custodial History: The books were originally collected by Oscar Gallis in Winnipeg. After his death the collection of books were gathered by his nephew Bruce Sarbit and brought to Brandon where the books were stored at the Sarbit residence. On September 25, 2007 Mr. Sarbit donated the collection to the McKee Archives at Brandon University.

Scope & Content: Collection consists twenty two socialist and Marxist inspired texts many published by the Charles H. Kerr Company Publishers, noted for its role in the distribution of Marxist texts in North America. Authors represented include Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Lenin, Antonio Labriola, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Paul Lafargue. The titles in this collection represent a cross-section of the type of literature acquired by labour activists in Winnipeg's working class community in the early decades of the twentieth century."

I kept, and still have, the *Chumash*. And, as I write these words, I look up and see it, next to one of Sidney's books, "Thus Spake Zarathustra").

As we prepared to attend Simon's Bar Mitzvah, we wondered what gift to give a 13 year-old we did not know except through his teacher, Barb. Games, toys and the gift of money, the usual gifts, came to mind. And, then, remembering Barb's description of

him, I knew that it had to reflect the reading heritage of our Gallis family, of Zaida Phillip, of Uncle Oscar, but especially of his great-uncle and namesake, Sidney.

In a (fancy) shopping bag, I packed several of the finer volumes that had once belonged to Sidney, books that I had "inherited" about twenty-five years before when Sidney had died: hardcover, first edition, sets of Sherlock Holmes, Dashiell Hammett and Greek Philosophy. We also gave Simon a gift of money and this letter in which I promoted the virtues of reading as Sidney had done it, with passion and intensity.

October 2000

Dear Simon,

When I think of your great-uncle, Sidney, I am reminded of George Santayana's marvellous observation: "There are books in which the footnotes, or the comments scrawled by some reader's hand in the margin, are more interesting than the text." That is certainly true of Sidney's books, even if the comments aren't always understandable to me.

And, I imagine what he was experiencing as he read, made his marks and wrote those notes. In the subsequent sentence, Santayana said: "The world is one of these books." And that was also true for Sidney, for he lived, he moved through life, with the same kind of passion and intensity with which he marked his texts. His vocabulary, even in everyday circumstances, was marked by expressions such as "Awesome!" and "Wonderful!"

With his passing, what is left for me, besides memories, all of them fond, are Sidney's books and whatever lessons I am able to cull from his approach to reading and to life.

To honour his memory as you become Bar Mitzvah, Simon, I could think of nothing more appropriate than to give you a few of your great-Uncle Sidney's books.

Marcel Proust wrote: ". . . every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self."⁶ Proust recognized that reading may give us

⁶ *Marcel Proust, Time Regained*

occasion to examine, to understand and to expand ourselves. Some, Freud being an excellent example, believe that the self-examination, understanding and growth happen because our unconscious mind has been stimulated. A significant encounter will occur when literature speaks to us of aspects of life that we have somehow managed to repress and forget. Freud suggested that a comparison could be drawn between fiction and the things we invent in our day-dreaming: so, reading fiction may allow us to enter a state, free of tension, in which we are able “to enjoy our own day-dreaming without self-reproach or shame.”

Along the same lines, but with a negative twist, Julia Kristeva tells us that reading good literature may “lead us . . . into our malaises, where we seldom go except in dreams.”⁷ So, for her, reading may create opportunities to look at, and perhaps, to work through crises and concerns that limit the ways in which we live.

People often tell me about how differently they see things after an encounter with certain literature. Reading had acted as a catalyst for changes in their perspective. It facilitated passage from one stage or state of self-awareness to another. I think that’s what happened to Sidney. His reading made him more aware of life and of his sense of awe and wonder at it, in it.

The idea that we may grow from an encounter with literature is illustrated by a Breton legend retold by Martin Buber. The “*Ar Vif*” is the story of a human-sized demonic book, intelligible only to those who do battle with its evil spirits and are able to conquer them. Buber believed that every serious book is like the *Ar Vif* and that every serious reader knows how important it is to take on the challenges contained within the book’s covers. Buber’s interpreter, Maurice Friedman, saw something magical, yet still real, in the image of literature, like the *Ar Vif*, unwilling to give up its meaning without a struggle. He encouraged us to overcome our tendencies to be passive and casual as readers. He advocated that we treat our

⁷ Julia Kristeva

reading as a no-holds-barred wrestling with the text, as our meeting with the *Ar Vif*.⁸

In a similar vein, Kafka wrote: to his friend, Oskar Pollak:

“I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. ... What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.”⁹

Now, Simon, because I don't know you or your tastes (and because books are heavy!), I haven't given you very many books relative to the number Sidney asked me to keep for him. But, I want you to know that Sidney's books are yours and your family's as much as, or more than, they are mine. They are yours for the taking (and reading). As you can see, I have an ulterior motive in only giving you a few books at this time: getting your great-uncle Sidney's books to you will provide me with a reason to see you and your family more. Getting to know you (all) better through books would be great.

Cousin, Bruce

The Bar Mitzvah itself escapes memory, but what happened afterwards doesn't. Sitting in the centre of the synagogue reception room with all his other presents was ours to Simon.

I was eating bagels and egg salad, schmoozing with long-lost relatives and friends when, suddenly, unexpectedly, I heard a kid's excited cry from across the room: "I've got the history of Greek Philosophy!"

Music to my Gallis ears! Simon was showing off the books we had given him. While the rest of the guests continued to schmooze and his friends excitedly studied his other gifts — wallets, pens, and with much more interest, games and toys — I watched

⁸ *Maurice Friedman, To Deny Our Nothingness: Contemporary Images of Man*

⁹ *Franz Kafka, Letter*

Simon, then and there, oblivious to the hubbub around him, madly thumb through Volume 1, keen to find, at first opportunity, a comfy chair so that he could read.

Zaida Phillip, Uncle Oscar, Simon's great-Uncle Sidney, and many of our Gallis clan, including me, would have wanted to do the same.