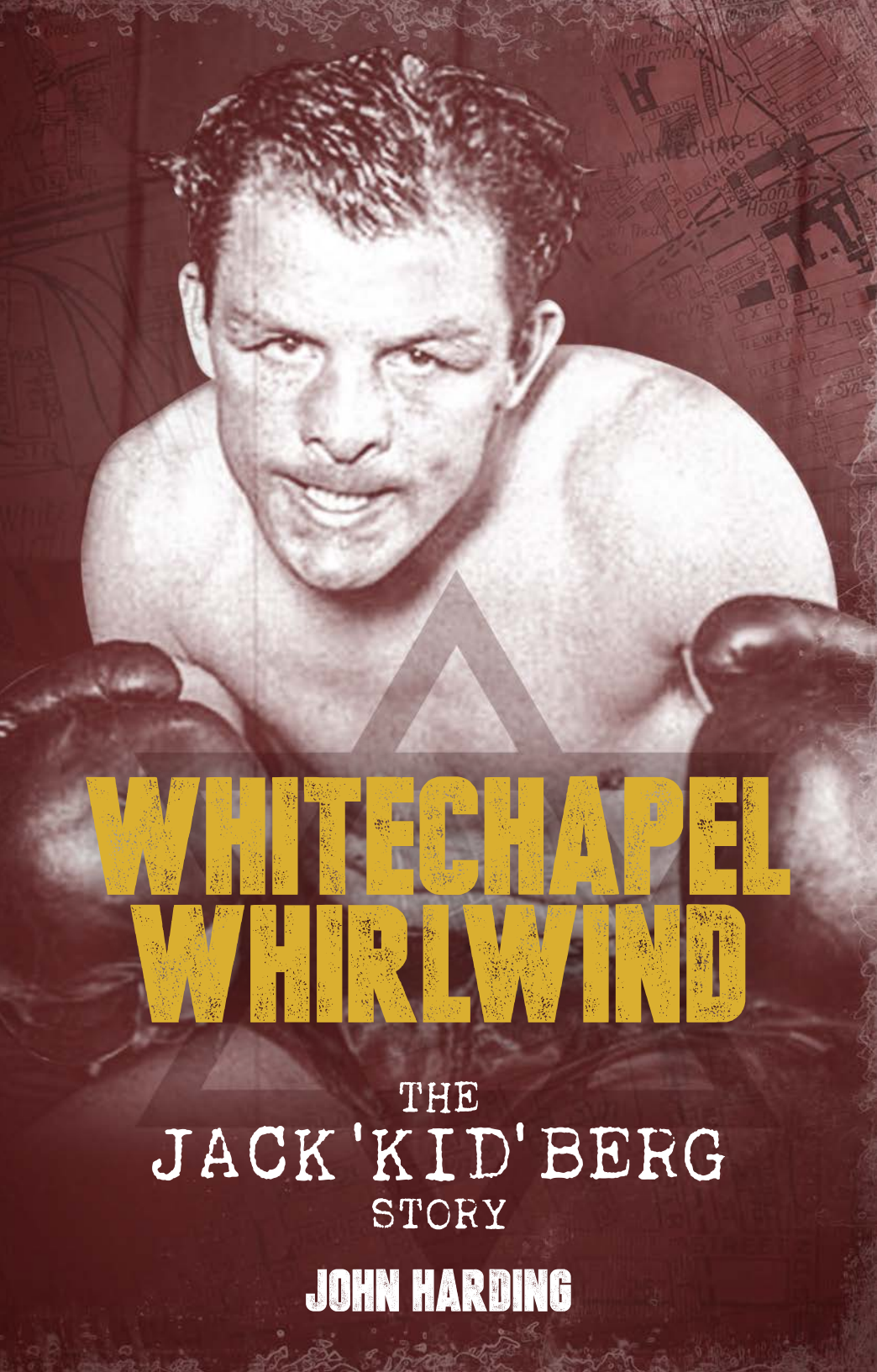

WHITECHAPEL WHIRLWIND

THE JACK 'KID' BERG STORY

JOHN HARDING

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England's Human Buzzsaw.
USA cartoon c1930

Chapter One

How it all began

If England is to be the dumping ground for foreign 'scum' so well and good – but let all aliens be taught that England is a Christian country…

(Letter to the *East London Observer*, February 1909)

FOR the many thousands of Jewish refugees who arrived in England at the turn of the century, the East End of London was a blessed refuge. For their sons and daughters a decade or more later, it was a ghetto, a prison without walls from which they wished only to escape.

Back in the 1980s, the escapees from that ghetto, drawn back by nostalgia for a fleeting visit, would have looked around bemused. They would have searched in vain for physical remnants of their past, to find only a few fading shop signs (Messrs Hackman, Cohen and Zangwill also having long since moved on) or grimy swirls of masonry suggesting the site of a synagogue, a music hall or a cinema. But more often they would have found simply gaps in walls, or alleyways that led to new estates, or bleak open spaces where once whole communities thrived.

For the Jewish East End 1back then was a broken shell in the process of being pieced together again for others to inhabit.

Strangest of all to the returnee, the new inhabitants who moved here and there, in and out of workshops and houses – people who should have been so familiar that the returnee might have expected at any moment to be hailed from a window or slapped on the shoulder – were strangers. No one recognises the returnee; thus, he or she can walk about incognito, as if in a perfect disguise.

Ironically, disguise was a crucial factor in escaping from Eastern Europe. Names were disguises and names were changed, borrowed, altered, anglicised and adapted with great alacrity before the First World War, creating a maze of identities and false trails. Layer was added to layer of confusion, so that to trace the trail of immigrant families back beyond the docks to Eastern Europe from whence they came remains almost impossible.

Thus, Jack Berg's forebears remain lost somewhere in the depths of Poland or Russia. The appearance of his immediate family out of the East is a subject of fruitless discussion and speculation, as it is for many of the thousands of Jewish descendants of the original immigrants. His parents were either Polish or Russian (family lore included some references to the Black Sea ports of Odessa and Nikolayev), but no one really knows for sure. Of his grandparents, there is only a fleeting memory and even that is shrouded in legend. Jack said in a recent interview, 'My grandmother came to visit us from Canada. I can remember her sitting me on her knee. She went back on the *Titanic*.'

His parents were typical: young with children and penniless. Their progress was typical too: father becoming a tailor; mother bringing up seven children in never more than two rooms.

Judah Bergman Senior, Jack's father, arrived first with friends ('landsmen' from his village) having been thrown off the ship upon which he had hoped to travel to the United States. Judah had made his way to Leman Street in east London, where he lodged at the Jewish Shelter. Eventually an employer selected him from amongst the crowd, took him to a cellar and stood him in front of a treadle machine. He learned his trade the hard way.

Within a year or so, he was earning enough money to be able to rent a two-room apartment above a fish shop in Cable Street. He sent for his wife Mildred and children Woolf (later changed to Willie) and Sarah, who made the hazardous sea journey from Odessa. On 28 June 1909, Jack was born (originally named Judah after his father) under the sign of Cancer the Crab. ('A fish sign – what else, over a fish shop!' Jack jokes.)

This confluence of sea creatures, according to his mother, accounted for his immense lung power, which gave him the ability to swim underwater for considerable lengths of time and gave him strength and powers of endurance well above the average. Jack insists that there was another factor in his favour:

> Plus, I had a caul over my head at birth. That's very rare. Only one child in a thousand, maybe even ten thousand, are born that way. It's very lucky. You can see into the future and you'll never drown. A sailor will pay a lot of money for that! And someone stole mine. I had it in a locket round my neck when I was a baby – it shrinks to the size of a sixpence.
>
> A thief got into our house when my mother was out one day, turned the place upside down, and when my mother came home she found me under a pile of clothes under the cot. The caul they never found. But the luck remains. That never leaves you. My mother used to tell me that: she was a very superstitious woman.

And these few things – powerful lungs, a lucky caul – were all gifts bestowed upon him at birth. Apart, that is, from his Jewish identity. The Bergmans were part of the greatest mass migration of Jewish people in recorded history when, between the years 1901 and 1914, over one and a half million Jews left Eastern Europe – a people that had, after centuries of persecution, become a nation without nationhood, resigned to poverty, isolation and violence, but which, under threat of extinction

through massacres and pogroms, had stirred and wrenched itself free at last from a centuries-old homeland.

The Jews had dared to suppose that there was somewhere else to go, a new world radically different from the one that had rejected them. Many were poor and starving, yet they travelled west to the United States, to Canada and to England, where the Jewish East End accepted upwards of 50,000 of them in ten years. They journeyed not so much in desperation but with a strength and determination that was to have a profound effect on Western society in the decades that followed.

For London, the impact of this sudden influx on the existing pattern of settlement was tremendous. The original Jewish enclave was bounded in the south by Cable Street, the Irish and the docks; in the north it was limited by the English working-class hamlets of Bethnal Green and Hackney; and to the west lay the City, so as the enclave filled up the new immigrants were forced to push east and, in doing so, their distinctive lifestyle began to project a bizarre quality on the narrow streets and courtyards of Whitechapel, Mile End and St Georges.

Self-contained street communities were swiftly established, gathered around workshops and shtibls (Yiddish for 'small house', 'Hasidic house of prayer', all-purpose stores), where the men would meet on Sundays to discuss the Rabbi's sermon, politics, the local scandal. Thus, the Jewish East End before the First World War became a world within a world and for the native Englishman, a trip beyond the Aldgate Pump was often presented in the guise of an exotic, oriental adventure.

An *Evening Standard* journalist's report of just such a trip at the turn of the century, under the lurid heading 'The Haunts of the East End Anarchist', sets the tone. The author's journey led him along narrow streets more or less alike in appearance consisting of small two-storey tenements with an occasional cow-shed or stable to break the monotony and a sprinkling of little shops devoted to coal and dried fish, stale fruit and potatoes, pickled cucumber and salt-herrings, shrivelled sausages and sour brown bread. He saw window-bills written in Hebrew characters

informing him of what were known as 'loshings' or a 'bek-rum' (back room) to let. Some streets were, said the author, 'wholly given over to foreign tailors, clickers and machiners, where low-pitched tenements were so far below the pavement level that the passer-by can comfortably shake hands with the resident on the top floor through the bedroom window'.

The author said he passed 'unkempt and dishevelled gossips attended by twice as many barefoot children' and walked along 'uneven roadways and gutters invariably sloppy and sloshy owing to the grooming of horses always going on and the practice the residents have adopted of emptying their waste water from the upper windows'.

Could this have been England?

It was Jack Berg's England and, soon after being born, he was taken with his family even deeper into the ghetto, to Christian Street, 50 yards north of Cable Street. There they lived in a three-storey house – his family occupying two rooms on the second floor, while above was his father's workshop. Below lived a Rabbi, the father of the landlord and a sweat-shop owner. It was to this Rabbi that young Jack was sent to learn Hebrew.

> My father was very religious, very strict. On Jewish holidays he wore a hat and he was very strict with dishes. In the Jewish religion you must have separate dishes for meat and milk.
>
> You can't have meat on a milk dish and vice versa. In that, he was very strict, and he lit candles every Friday night. My mother would say a prayer over them, but she wasn't like my father. She used to like bacon and eggs, so she'd slip out of the house to have them, so my father wouldn't know!
>
> My father went to Synagogue very regularly. I wanted to be in the choir at the Philpot Street Synagogue when I was a boy, but my voice wasn't good enough for that. And with the Rabbi downstairs, I played truant. I used to spend the money my father

gave me for the lessons – a couple of bob – on sweets. And he found out, eventually, and he nearly killed me for that! He had a real temper and when he learned about the Hebrew lessons, well, he beat me.

You know those long-handled brushes that barbers use? Well, he said to me, picking the brush up, *'Ennil machil mein heindt',* which means, 'I'm not going to hurt my hands on you!' And he went bam 'bam bam' and broke the blinking brush!

He had a real temper – he was always throwing things and he would smash plates sometimes. He was short and very strong, and I've seen him rush out after someone and pummel him with both hands, bam bam bam, like driving a stake into the ground.

In our religion you don't become a man until you're 13, when you have what is called your Bar Mitzva. My brothers Woolf and Izzie, they were Bar Mitzva'd but my Dad passed me over! I suppose because I was no bloody good. I wasn't a success at the classes. I only used to go once, twice a week, because I was a roughneck. I was always the bad boy, always out in the streets.

Just before the First World War, the Bergmans moved a second time; the house, or building to which they went, still stands. Just off the Whitechapel Road, a hundred yards down New Road, one turns right into Fieldgate Street, then left, and one is in Romford Street. Flanked on either side by gaunt, turn-of-the-century tenements now in the process of being gutted and refurbished, the street is no more than 200 yards long.

Situated just a few yards from a broad, busy thoroughfare, it is a claustrophobic and sunless place. On the day, Jack took me on a trip around his old neighbourhood. Jack laughed and pointed to some graffiti scrawled on a wall, a four-letter word six feet high.

This place hasn't changed! Still a dirty, rough hole.

And he stood looking down Romford Street at 'The Buildings' – Fieldgate Mansions – red-brick, three-storey, oddly imposing edifices, their open staircases leading up past gaping balconies, and yet more graffiti – 'Anarchy Now!'

But neither Judah nor his parents were concerned with politics – the First World War swept the anarchists and the Jewish socialists away, on to the USA, back to Russia.

Jack pointed along Fieldgate Street.

> Just along there, see, by Rowton House Buildings, down a side-street on the right. That was where Wonderland stood, though I never saw it. It was a famous boxing hall and everybody fought there – Pedlar Palmer, Tommy Burns the world heavyweight champion, Jim Driscoll, Young Joseph. It burned down when I was a baby.

He continued down Romford Street, followed by a crowd of small Bengali children.

> Number 248, that's my place! That's where we lived up by that balcony. See those railings? And the staircase? From the top balcony, you could look down and see the dustbins below. I used to climb up and slide all the way down, down the bannisters, and one day, I fell! From the top, right down into the dustbins – three flights! Into the dustbins full of muck and shit – how do you like that! I used to throw cats off that balcony to see if they'd land on their feet. They always did. I hated cats. Dogs, I loved! But cats were unlucky for me.

Looking up at the railings above, it's easy to see how, in such a tiny place (and by now the Bergmans were a family of five children and two adults crammed into two small rooms), the life of the streets beckoned to him, offering him freedom from the cramped surroundings of the apartment and the workshop. Inside was the

world of the adult; but the streets, as ever, belonged to the boys and girls, like the Bengali children all around us, running to and fro like flocks of excited starlings.

It is easy to see how Jack would take to the streets, to taste the delights of freedom and the possibilities of the city. The street would prepare him for the future.

Easy to forget, too, with the thunder of Commercial Road traffic drifting over the rooftops, that before the First World War the East End was a mix of city and countryside; debased countryside, perhaps, but the inhabitants lived amid a cluster of small-scale factories, stables, dairies and wasteland; they were close to the farms of Essex and Buckinghamshire, which stocked the local markets directly. The local people kept their own animals, the Jewish immigrant in particular keeping chickens and preferring to slaughter his own stock for religious feasts. Many Jewish immigrants had come from the rural areas of Eastern Europe, living in what were called *shtetls,* which were a combination of towns and agricultural communities.

Arriving here after a life close to the land, they were forced into stifling sweat-shops, where many succumbed to the diseases and illnesses rife in those unhealthy, unregulated semi-prisons. But old lifestyles and habits died hard; those who prospered and survived in the East End had to be tough.

Jack stopped at the bottom of Romford Street.

> This sweet shop on the corner was run by a man called Benjamin Cohen – old Benjie. He was a real rough guy, a real street-fighter. He had a broken nose and they called him the Ox. He was a coal and coke man. He would ride out with his horse and van calling 'Cooaaak! Coal and Coke!' Or he would do moving jobs with his horses. He had a stable across Cannon Street and he had one big horse called Katy, and when I was about nine or so, just a kid, I'd go to the stables and get grub for her or go across the Whitechapel Road to a place called Saches, which sold horse supplies, and I would

> carry hundredweight sacks. On my back! And walk back to the stable! I was a tough kid and he was a very tough old man.
>
> I was always in the stables over Cannon Street. That's where I got my love of horses. I loved the smell of stables and when they were shoeing a horse, I'd stand on the corner of the road, just to smell it! Anything to do with horses, I loved. I worked for a milkman, too, and I carried the churns, one in each hand and one with my teeth.
>
> Just around the corner from here lived Benjie's mate. He was called 'Shlompky' – a short, stocky fellow, another ox! He and Benjie were always fighting. They and their friends all came from somewhere in Poland, all came together, they were farmers. 'Schlompky' was in the same business, lifting and moving things with a horse and wagon. And 'Shlompky' could lift a horse off the ground! I've seen him do it, just ducked under it, and straightened up. Lifted it up on his shoulders. He could lift a piano, too.

Like many a corner shop in the East End, Cohen's store in Fordham Street was the focus for a tiny community, a hundred yards or more in any direction, a centre for casual employment: shovelling coke, coal, mucking out horses, labouring and lifting; a place where men arriving from the docks could find a bed and lodging (in a corner of a room); the shop itself selling anything and everything, even making its own ice-cream in the summer.

> I helped with that! It was one of my jobs. There was a big barrel filled with ice and the ice-cream was in a can in the centre and I had to turn a handle round and round – then they sold it in wafers and cornets.

And Jack, already nicknamed Yiddle – 'little (Polish) Jew' – was the apple of Benjie Cohen's eye. He travelled on the coke van,

mucked out the horses, looked after the Cohens' three children, David, Celie and Kitty, taking them to local cinemas to earn himself admission and sweets. And he grew up rapidly amid the weird and wonderful characters who populated Benjie's store.

> There was a fellow called Barney Bandage – all the kids knew him. He had the mark of a rat, a red blotch across his face which had a tail. How he had got it was, before he was born, his mother saw a rat run across her path and she put her hand up to her face in shock, and this caused the mark on Barney's face. It's a superstition, if a pregnant woman puts her hand to her face like that when she sees something that frightens her. Barney wore a bandage over it, and that was how he got his name. And there was an Italian, worked for Benjie in the stables, he ruptured himself trying to have sex with one of the horses! The horse just sucked him in, and he had to sit on a bowl of hot water because his balls went blue! Came up like a balloon.

Barney Bandage, Shlompky with his twirling moustache, lifting pianos, Benjie with his broken nose and scars, leaping from his van to beat up anyone he heard call out 'Bloody Jews': this was Jack Berg's world for the majority of his childhood; an East European *shtetl* crossed with an East End slum, a world no more than three, four streets across, wedged between two arterial roads – Whitechapel and Commercial Roads – leading into London, the Metropolis, that could have been another planet, just half a mile on.

Jack pointed along Myrdle Street running parallel with Romford Street**.**

> In this street Jackie Spot, the Jewish Godfather as they called him, he grew up there. He palled out with my younger brother, Izzie. His parents came from Poland, too, and they were called Cammacha originally, but

at the docks, because Mr Cammacha couldn't speak English, they called him Coalmore, just gave him that name, like they gave lots of Jewish people names that weren't their own. And that became Corner. Jack Corner. His mother, she was a beautiful woman! She and Mrs Cohen were both lovely – looking women – they kept chickens which they sold for religious days.

And Harry Mason's father – Mason was the lightweight champion of Great Britain, and welterweight – his father lived a block away, a little man, drank a bottle of whisky every day, and always arguing about something! Or boasting about his son ('My Harry!'). And Nat Cohen, who became a big film producer, he lived next door to the Cohens. His father was a butcher. I punched Nat one day, can't remember why, I was just a kid, but he and my elder brother chased me. Nat has never spoken to me since then.

A few yards on, the solid Victorian buildings of Myrdle Street School still stand. Jack points to the very top.

Right up there over the wall at the top is a flat roof, and that's where the teachers used to take the small children to play, like a little playground up there. I used to jump up on the ledge and run along, frightening the daylights out of the teachers! I was a little bastard. One day, at the beginning of the term, I was caned in front of the whole school. I can't remember why. I just remember bending over in front of the whole school – I was the first in the black book.

On the Commercial Road, Jack stood staring out at the traffic roaring by.

When I was a kid of six or seven, I was up and down these streets trying to earn some pocket money,

> always roaming about. I used to go to Fenchurch Street Station, Liverpool Street Station, down that way, and help people carry their bags to the buses, to trams or taxis, wherever they wanted to go. There were plenty of other kids doing that – the porters whose jobs and tips we were pinching used to chase us all over the station! And we'd fight between ourselves over the bags, or I'd go along the Strand and see if anyone wanted a cab, and maybe they would give me some coppers, or a bob, and then I'd be in trouble with the hotel porters for taking their tips! I was always in trouble of some kind. With the open-top buses, if someone's hat blew off I'd run after it and pick it up and go along to the next stop and hold the hat out and say, give me a bob or you won't get your hat back. A little roughneck!

Eventually Jack boarded a tube train at Aldgate and travelled west, back home to Chiswick. All his life, he had been making journeys west from the East End, escaping. Romford Street, Myrdle Street and Fieldgate Mansions are now hollow, unreal re-creations of what used to be, deserted and echoing.

> I was sure I would meet someone I knew – if I'd waited on a street corner, someone would have come along that I knew.

But on Back Church Lane, off the Commercial Road, there remained a grim building, its general outward appearance untouched by the passing of so much time, as though it could throw open its doors tomorrow to let in the local fistic fancy, shoving and shouting, yelling out the odds.

'That was Premierland,' Jack had said, pointing down Back Church Lane towards the imposing facades before hurrying on.

Back Church Lane is a drab, warehouse-dominated road that winds its way down to Cable Street and the docks, a gloomy road,

the breeze whipping by, carrying with it a whiff of the river. Through gaps between the massive doors of the then deserted warehouse, one could glimpse a vast open space beneath broken skylights, through which small birds fluttered. This was Premierland, the last great East End boxing hall where the story of Judah Bergman ended and the tale of Jack 'Kid' Berg began.