

TLC Showcase

ALICK GLASS

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Introduction to 'Mrs Pickles'

In 2008, following my semi-retirement from commercial activities, my daughter Suzanne, herself a published novelist, challenged me to turn my lifelong love of words and rhyme into something tangible. In response to my complaint that I was much too old, Suzanne said I might receive posthumous recognition. "I'd prefer to do it a wee bit faster than that!" I replied, and "Mrs Pickles" came to life in a first draft the following year.

It was a tale I had always wanted to tell, but on my initial submission I was disillusioned by an editor's multi-page response with constructive suggestions. I wrongly interpreted them as harsh criticism, and allowed the manuscript to languish in a filing cabinet where I rediscovered it earlier this year. Incorporating the suggestions I had previously disregarded made a huge difference, and I was recommended to submit the re-draft to TLC .

It saddens me that I did not pursue this route earlier, as I am currently revelling in the enthusiastic manner in which Aki and her team are promoting my interests. Their guidance, support and encouragement goes way beyond what I could have expected.

My novel is inspired by true family events. Elements of the plot are drawn from my personal experience of traditional Jewish family life in Edinburgh in the mid 1900's, and my first hand knowledge of the main characters. It tells the story of the life-long relationship between a Jewish doctor, Alexander "Sonny" Franklin, and his family's Scottish housemaid, Jessie Pickering.

What sets "Mrs Pickles" apart from a conventional love story however, is the influence of religious intolerance and family tradition. Their relationship is constantly threatened by Sonny's irrational fear of discovery and family disapproval. Jessie's devotion to him helps her to endure a life of subterfuge and deceit, until she is faced with a terrible choice.

'Mrs Pickles', by Alick Glass

The train clattered relentlessly on the last stage of its journey to Edinburgh. Sonny feared the confrontation that was to come. How would they react when he told them?

Perhaps it would have been easier if he had been honest with them on his return from active service almost thirty years previously.

He had not slept well, and the steady rhythm of speeding wheels crossing sleepers lulled him into a state of semi-awareness. His thoughts transported him to that late 1940's journey, and he watched the shadowy image of his grey hair and sallow complexion grow younger in the carriage window. He saw again the bronzed good looks of an army medical officer and, like a caricature of his present self, the over-heavy eyebrows and the inevitable pipe with which he emphasised and punctuated his conversations.

He recalled that the last moments of that post-war journey had been agonisingly prolonged. The carriage had grown noisy. Windows were lowered, allowing heads to emerge into the cold grey air, straining to advance their arrival by even a fraction of a second. First brakes, then buffers, had rocked the standing travellers and dislodged their luggage from the overhead racks. He had reached for his well-travelled bags labelled "Captain Alexander Franklin MD", and embellished with stickers bearing the exotic names of far-off places. Mementoes of a recent life far removed from the ken of those who awaited his return.

The platform had heaved and waved and called out to the carriages that spewed out their human cargo. He fought his way past couples wrapped in the warmth of their reunions, and into the embrace of parents, sister, uncles, aunts and cousins half-forgotten, calling out his nickname "Sonny!" "Sonny!"

Sonny had received no gallantry medals, no mention in despatches. But to the assembled throng he was their hero, their link to the world outside. A world that he had known, but about which they had only read in the press or heard on radio broadcasts. At last he had returned, and he knew they would expect him to seek permanent refuge in their midst. They would be disappointed.

They went 'home'. Sonny, his parents, his sister Sarah and his belongings in a taxi. The others wedged in a tramcar that ran from the General Post Office at the east end of Princes Street, past the Calton Hill and the Royal High School building towards Meadowbank, Restalrig Avenue and the Piershill cemetery, to the top of Sydney Terrace where they disembarked. An animated family caravan filing down the long road to number sixty-seven, and an onslaught of tea, sandwiches and cakes, that are an essential part of Jewish gatherings at times of joy and sorrow. For the Shemenski and Franklin family this was a festival.

How did he feel to be a civilian again? How did he feel to be home? That word 'home' jarred within him, as did their expectation that he would simply continue where he had left off before the war. Taking a job at the Royal Infirmary, or setting up a local "wee practice". There were offers to talk to the family GP, Sam Lipetz, whose overcrowded surgery would surely welcome a new recruit. Or to the local black

Dr. Beccles, whose practice might benefit if it was known that someone from the community had joined him. His initial pleasure of re-union soon gave way to the fear of being again enveloped in the blanket of family oppression from which he had managed to extract himself long ago.

His escape into the garden, to light his pipe and to reflect, was short lived. He was obliged to endure the relentless suffocation of outstretched hands and eager lips.

They followed him everywhere, expecting him to be impressed when they showed him small pieces of shrapnel they had found in a nearby field. How on the radio they had followed the progress of the Third Army, or heard the traitor 'Lord Haw Haw' warn that the Jews of Scotland would be thrown into 'Dixon's Blazes', the steel foundry in Glasgow. How they had worried that the Power Station chimney in nearby Portobello would be hit by a stray bomb and fall on their homes. Only his exaggerated pretence of travel-weariness acted as the catalyst for crowd dispersal. And when the others had left, Sarah and his parents tolerated his silence until they said goodnight.

He was awakened by birdsong in the early morning, and was almost surprised to find himself in the room in which he had spent his formative years. The same dark wood furniture, the same wallpaper, and the pale grey carpet that still bore the faint blue stains of the ink he had spilt so many years ago. In the bathroom he found

towels and soap neatly laid out for his use, and hanging on the door a new blue dressing gown with an embroidered "A.F." on the pocket. His arrival in the kitchen was enthusiastically greeted by his parents and Sarah demanding to know if he had slept well, if he felt good to back, if he liked "his favourite" breakfast of scrambled eggs, smoked salmon and bagels that they had specially prepared. The rest of the day, except when interrupted by calls from well-wishers, he spent advising them on their health issues, reflecting on the possible fate of the Lithuanian relatives Sonny had met on a brief pre-war trip to find his roots, and acknowledging without acquiescence or contradiction the plans that his parents and Sarah had made for his future.

It was only in the days of gentle interrogation that followed, that he was able to convince them that the demands of his career would involve a move down south. He invented an army colleague with whom he wanted to set up a joint practice in Leeds, and within a few weeks the happy trackside greetings were tearfully replaced with the anguish of renewed separation. Any distance between her and her brother was too far for Sarah, and his mother's eyes betrayed her disappointment that his return had not been permanent. He worried about her. Although she never complained at all, he had spoken to Dr Lipetz about her shortness of breath, and had asked to be alerted if there was ever cause for concern.

As the train pulled out of Waverley Station he continued to wave from the open window of the empty carriage, calling out his reassurances that he would write, and would be back soon. "Leeds isn't far away. I'll keep in touch!" he had called, until he could no longer be heard. Hand in handkerchiefed hand they remained on the platform, gazing at the naked rails until long after the train had passed from view, consoling each other that although it would be lonely again without him, at least this time he would be in no danger.

He settled into his empty compartment to enjoy his re-acquaintance with the scenic coastal route south from Edinburgh to Newcastle. The world had only recently emerged from extreme turmoil, but here it seemed that nothing had changed. He recognised North Berwick the small fishing village where he had spent happy days as a child, playing on the sand, fishing from the rocks and picnicking with his immigrant family. Adherence to the laws of Kashrus had meant that cafes and restaurants were not visited, but ice-cream parlours had been an exception and

a treat. They had an instant camaraderie with the smiling Italian owners, whose family-oriented close-knit way of life had much in common with Jewish one.

For these seaside visits, blankets and tablecloths were assembled, and baskets and bowls and jars filled with the traditional delicacies of their Lithuanian ancestry. From Cowan's Delicatessen, pickled gherkins and red cabbage and herrings. From Hoffenberg the kosher butcher there was tongue that had an aunt had pickled with bay leaves and peppercorns and pressed in a barrel with a brick on top. Gefilte fish, chopped and fried or boiled. Pungent horseradish mixed with beetroot to reduce the shock to the palate. From Kleinberg the baker, traditional black and rye bread to be spread with "smaltz", chicken fat, and liberally sprinkled with salt. No butter of course because the meal was "fleishic". Their religion dictated that dairy products and meat could not be mixed. Lemonade and cider. On reflection it fascinated him that unlike most ethnic groups, strong drink was never part of the Jewish scene. Kosher wine of course on Sabbath and festivals, and the odd whiskey, or "bramphen" as they called it in Yiddish. Strange language. His father would often enjoy "bramphen and paparossen", whiskey and cigarettes.

While he had been living at home, these dietary rules had presented no problems, but in the army he had found it realistic to abandon them. In the barracks he had had no wish to draw attention to his differences, and survival was the only issue in the squalor he had often experienced abroad. He had learned to enjoy a breakfast of bacon and eggs, but illogically the very appearance of pork remained for him one step too far. When extreme hunger was the only alternative, he could not take that final leap into religious oblivion – and he had laughed at himself at the oddness of that. *"Except for the ultra-orthodox"* he had once explained to a colleague, and to himself, *"we Jews draw our lines of observance in different places"*.

He had always felt more Scottish than Jewish. For his Barmitvah he had learned the Hebrew texts. He had attended synagogue on high festivals, but generated paternal displeasure when he excused himself from more regular Sabbath visits to the prayer-hall in Salisbury Road. His parents, Abram and Rose Franklin, the children of refugees from the Russian Pogroms of the 1880's, had instilled in him traditions, not faith. Observance of dietary laws had been his only tangible, and transient, commitment to religion, and his medical training and wartime experiences had quickly eradicated any lingering belief in an omnipotent God.

His father had remained observant despite his incongruous trade as a bookmaker. He attended the Edinburgh Powderhall Sprints every New Year, taking bets on athletes running over 100 to 1500 yards. He had a "pitch" on the rails at the Scottish racecourses in Musselburgh, Hamilton, Kelso and Ayr. He did not "make a book" on Saturday though. That was the Sabbath. Obviously Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and Passover were out too! Like his previous commercial failures, bookmaking was an occupation at which Abram was spectacularly unsuccessful, and in Sonny's recollections of his youth, his father's sullen face and ill-humour were indelibly marked.

"No good to me!" he would report each time he returned from the races with his empty satchel, having taken the gamblers' bets on the first five races, only to dissipate the proceeds when he became a losing punter himself in the last. On these nights, Rosie, Sonny and Sarah had learned to keep their distance.

Sonny was jolted from his reflections when the English border was crossed near Berwick, and the conductor announced that Newcastle was the next stop. Kneeling on the seat, he adjusted his tie in the mirror, patted his hair into place, flicked a speck from the shoulder of the first civilian suit he had worn for years, and calmed his mounting anticipation with the slow deliberate kneading of tobacco in his pouch. He filled his pipe but did not light it. Instead he caressed its bowl with the finger and thumb of his right hand and, deep in thought, gently and unconsciously tapped its stem against his teeth to the rhythm of the train.

He knew she would be there to meet him. She was so fastidious about time keeping. She would have taken the early morning bus from Bathgate and would have arrived hours ago. They had managed only two brief and furtive interludes together during his time in Edinburgh, but now they would be free from the threat of discovery, disentangled from the web of deceit.

Fearing the wrath of his family, he had spun that web so often, and never more than in the last few weeks, as he invented correspondence received from his fictitious army friend. *"Roger"* he had called him. Nice guy. Well educated. Well-connected in Yorkshire. *"Laid everything on for me already"* was the story he had fabricated, *"even found me an apartment while I look for a property in which to set up practice"*. An innocent story, so well rehearsed that it had been readily accepted. He felt no shame.

He was protecting them after all. No harm done. No hurt, the way the truth would hurt. He would tell them when he felt the time was right.

He placed his newspaper on the seat opposite, lit his pipe now, stretched out his legs, and amused himself with the recollection of their first meeting.

He was in his last year at college, about to start as an intern at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Escaping the over-brewed tea of the hospital canteen he had crossed the road at lunchtime to the Beachcomber Café. As he searched for a table he had seen her sitting alone in the corner. Head buried in a paperback.

"Is this chair free?" He asked. She had nodded, and at the point of mutual recognition she had blushed. *"You work for my Uncle Max and Aunt Annie don't you?"*

She replied with a timid *"Yes"*.

He pulled out the empty chair and sat opposite her.

"Thought I recognised you. Sorry, I can't recall your name." "Jessie. Jessie Pickering". She replied, and continued *"And you're Dr. Franklin"*.

He responded with a laugh. *"Not yet, still a student. And anyway it's a bit pompous. I'm just plain Alexander. Alex. Sonny. Whatever you want"*

She smiled, gaining confidence. *"OK. Sonny then. I've heard the family call you that."*

He reached over and turned her paper-back towards him, saying *"And I've seen Auntie Annie reading that! 'Blazing Guns and Saddles' by Zane Grey. An Annie Shemenski's special!"*

"Yes, I borrowed it" she replied, hastily adding, *"She didn't mind. She's got hundreds of them"*

He smiled knowingly *"Her obsession. She says she has some relative in Hollywood who makes Cowboy films!"*

And then there was silence. The common thread of conversation had come to an end. She sipped her tea. Dropped her head again to her book, as he lit his pipe, saying *"Don't mind do you?"*

"No. *That's fine*" she replied. As they sat in silence, he looked at her. Young. Pretty. Neat, in a white starched blouse and pleated skirt. Her cheeks had reddened again as she felt his stare. And that was the innocent way it had started.

His parents routinely shared Sunday afternoons with the family playing cards at Max and Annie Shemenski's house. Rummy and Canasta seemed to provoke the worst in them. Each hand would be followed by a "post mortem" as they called it. Their respective errors would be analysed and criticised in raised tones. The lingering arguments often unresolved until the following week when the process was repeated. Sonny had rarely attended as he found the atmosphere oppressive and uncomfortable, but after his brief Beachcomber café encounter with Jessie, his enthusiasm to join them had grown. Appropriate eye contact would be made before Sonny excused himself "*to meet friends at the Students Union*", and he would then wait for Jessie to join him at corner of the street. Initially they would simply share a bench in the King's Park or the Botanic Gardens, and chat for an hour or so until it was time for Jessie to return to her duties, but as the weeks passed these brief sojourns began to take on a new meaning.

First they walked side by side, then bravely hand in hand. Often along the promenade in Portobello. An exotic name for the rather scruffy stretch of sand and pebbles that runs along the seafront past the red brick Power Station towards Joppa. Not a bathing costume in sight. In the usually inclement weather they would watch children, warm in coats, hats and shoes, making sandcastles, and the best of things, on what passed for a beach. Or listen to youngsters, encouraged by the promised reward of a penny, singing "*My Cup's Full and Running Over*" to the accompaniment of the Salvation Army Band. The Amusement Arcades were the big attraction when it rained. Erin Deane, a large jolly man, was the owner of most of the beachfront facilities. On each visit they would nod to each other in recognition. Although Deane was also Jewish, he had "*married out*" and didn't mix in Jewish circles. There was little chance that he would report to the family Sonny's obvious intimacy with Jessie. So even in that busy location they felt secure.

About the Writer

Alick Glass was born in Edinburgh and educated at the Royal High School before joining his family business in the late 1950's. Following his marriage to Ruth and the birth of his children Suzanne (an author and playwright) and Richard (a lawyer) he moved to London in 1968.



Alick is primarily recognised for his services to the Fresh Produce Industry, having been the recipient of the industry's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009. As CEO and Chairman of a major quoted company for over 25 years, and industry spokesman at Government and EU level, his expertise in this field is internationally acknowledged.

Alick is also an accomplished after-dinner speaker with a penchant for poetry and music. He has always been a writer, but an unorthodox one. Without seeking acknowledgement he has composed countless addresses, speeches and poems for friends, acquaintances and strangers and has coached their delivery at public events and private functions. He provided the lyric translation for his daughter's successful off-Broadway production of *"The Milliner"*.

In recent years he has found more time to devote to writing under his own name. He has composed the book, lyrics and music for a 2-act musical *"Reputation"* the recent reading of which was highly acclaimed by its audience at Pineapple Studios in London.

Inspired by his three grandchildren, Alick has written various books of poetry for children, and, although as yet unpublished, his first novel *"Mrs Pickles"* has been positively reviewed.