

**'How Billy the anti-Semite
made me a Zionist'**

(An autobiographical poem)

by

Jeffrey M Cohen

*This poem should only be circulated in full, with author attribution and without alteration or abbreviation.
For further poetry and works by Jeffrey M Cohen, see www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk*

A nobody,
Was I,
At primary school;
Invisible,
Amid a pool
Of mindless kids,
Filled with hatred
Of the Yids.

It left me
Truly mystified;
When I told the teachers,
I knew they'd lied;
'You're imagining it!'
I was told;
A reassurance
That left me
Cold.

At 11 a.m.,
Every day,
When, in the playground,
We would play,
One lad, especially,
Did his best
To demonstrate
To the rest
That he was leader
Of the gang;
That he controlled
The whole shebang,
At Thomas Street
Methodist School –
Where tolerance
Was the rule;
Though, for many kids,
That was
Uncool.

It's seventy years,
And I can still
Recall the face
Of Billy Hill,
Giving me
His stony stare,
Piercing me

With his hate-filled glare;

Shoving me

Against the wall,

Watched by cronies,

Strong and tall.

I wasn't tough,

And the school

Was rough;

And Billy could never

Get enough

Of taunting me

With the word

'Jew,'

As if

An eight year-old knew

Of the timeless venom

Investing that term,

Which millennia of Billys,

Were born to affirm.

'You dirty rat!' -

Billy spat.

That was the very

First brickbat

That I'd received,

As a young child,

But would later come
To regard as mild,
Considering how
We were reviled,
Charged with the crime
Of deicide;
Devoid of hope,
Deprived of pride.

One day,
After giving me
A bloodied nose,
Bully Billy
Changed his prose,
Significantly:
'Just get back
To your own land,
And join the Stern Gang's
Terrorist band,
That shoots to kill
Our British lads -
And declares war
On our dads!'

In tears,
I ran home
That day,

Not comprehending,
In any way,
What Billy Hill
Had said to me;
The way he'd screamed,
Abusively.

My dad, then,
Sat me down,
And, with forehead
Creasing into a frown,
Outlined the history
Of our nation,
And of the deepest
Desperation
With which we'd faced
Discrimination:
The harm inflicted
Grievously,
The bloodshed
And the enmity;
The cruelty,
And the genocide;
The basic human rights
Denied;
The faults,
Perceived,

And magnified;
The grotesque caricatures,
Applied -
By Church and state,
Sanctified;
A poison
That was spread
World-wide.

And then my mum
Interjected,
And with excitement,
She reflected
On how our people
Had now begun
To return to Zion,
And what they'd done
To reclaim the swamps
And build anew,
To provide a home
For every Jew;
A melting-pot
From around the globe –
An international
Wardrobe;
With skin hues
Of every shade,

And variety in
The way they prayed;
A diversity
Of dialect;
Their Hebrew,
Struggling
To perfect;
Contributing
Culinary fare,
Flavored with
Their spices,
Rare;
The ancestral crafts
That they'd produced,
And, to Israel,
Introduced;
Sewing a tapestry,
So rich -
Each citizen sewing
A vital stitch.

I sat transfixed
On mother's knee,
Listening to her
Enlightening me:

"That's the 'home'

That Billy meant,
As the place to which
You should be sent;
For his mum and dad
Have taught that lad
That every Jew he'll meet

Is bad;
And this would be
A better place
If cleansed of
The Jewish race."

I thought for a moment,
Then looked
At mum:
"Billy's right!
We must be dumb
To stay where
There's so much hate,
When we've got our own
Jewish state!

Mum and dad
Exchanged a glance:
"Son, not everyone
Has the chance
Of just packing

A case
At any time,
Especially when
They're in their prime,
With a good job,
And mouths to feed,
And the cosy life,
They love
To lead.

Then there's
The language –
What a bind!
For English tongues,
Not designed!
And to leave family
At our age,
And with close friends,
To disengage -
We just can't face it
At our stage.

“But you don't have
All those ties,
And clearly face
So many
'Whys?'
You've sensed already

An unease,
And racism's
Chilly breeze;
And now you know
Where you can find
A destiny
That is entwined
With brethren
Of a similar kind,
Building up
A Jewish state,
With a place for you –
For us,
It's too late.”

But remember one thing,
As you go through life,
Jews will always face strife,
Whether in their national home
Or in any place
That they might roam.

The world is full
Of Billys, son,
But no longer are Jews
On the run.

**Copyright,
Jeffrey M Cohen
28th Dec. 2014**

Biographical note:

Jeffrey M Cohen was born in Manchester in 1940 and attended the Thomas Street Methodist School from 1944 until 1949 when he was enrolled in the first pupil intake of the Broughton Jewish Primary School, of which his late father, Louis Cohen ” , was the founding treasurer. The call of the rabbinate prevented him and his wife, Gloria, from making Aliyah, though public activism for Israel was among his main preoccupations. He fully accepts that this leaves him open to the critique of calling on others to ‘do as I say, not as I do!’ They have a home in Netanya and hope to make Aliyah in the near future!

