

### 3. London School of Economics

Well, at the LSE...

*DA:* How did you go there?

*MA:* How did I go there? I got a scholarship.

*DA:* Why did you apply there as opposed to somewhere else?

*MA:* Oh, because the people at Latymer said, “You are cut out to be a politician ... you are obviously interested in politics, you know more about politics ... the only place to go, and you have got to go to a university, is the London School of the Economics,” which I had never heard of. But I then found out that one of the masters was taking an external degree at the LSE ... so I said, “Okay, fine”. And they said, “You have to sit an exam, and a few scholarship exams as well”. I did, and it worked out. I went there, to the LSE, and it was very pleasant. I found a few friends ... very close friends ... I began to play for the second football team, which made me okay with the heavies, and meanwhile I kept in as part of this small group<sup>1</sup>.

*DA:* What sort of departmental structure did it have? Is it the same as it is now or ...

*MA:* No, it was dominated in those days by two things – I think if one wanted to say what was distinctive about the LSE in those days, was first of all the teachers. You know, you didn’t go along to someone called Mr. Jones or Mr. Brown or Professor Brown or Professor Jones. You were taught by Harold Laski! or by Professor Tawney<sup>2</sup>! or if you were very lucky, Sir William Beveridge! World figures. I mean if you were interested in politics they were world figures. Little upstarts who were just beginning their careers as teachers turned out to be Kingsley Martin, the late editor of the New Statesman. They were all stars, and they were brilliant teachers. And Laski’s relationship with his students, and it was a big place even in those days, Laski’s relationship with his students was that he would say, to about a dozen – fifteen, twenty of them, “Every Tuesday I will arrange to be at home in Edison Place. Any of you who care to come around are welcome.” And usually a dozen of us turned up, sat on

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<sup>1</sup> Mark tells Rebecca (in her interview) that for a year he “was able to get a flat in Bloomsbury at 6 Tavistock Square. The landlords, jointly, were Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf. The only disturbance they caused me was they had the Hogarth Press in the basement and when there was a publication ... the press in the basement was pounding away, but I didn’t hear much because I was right up in the attic.”

<sup>2</sup> Mark’s PhD supervisor.

the floor. He would talk about the American Constitution, about the American Supreme Court, about what the Labour Party want to do ... you know, we would take part as not quite as equals, because we weren't, obviously we weren't equals. But as participants, and not simply as people listening and taking notes. And that's the sort of place it was. All of them -- the History Department, Geography Department -- they were world figures. In the political world anyway.

And the other distinctive thing about it: there was a very high proportion, in the Graduate School anyway, of Americans -- bright Americans who would have heard, even in the back woods of Oregon, heard about the London School of Economics. And their ambition was to go on to the LSE. And that was very stimulating. Because some of them were very bright and even when they weren't bright they were interesting.

*DA: Who were your friends, and what were you reading?*

MA; Well, I was suppose to be reading Descriptive and Analytical Economics. And this meant that you took a history of the theory of economics from Adam Smith, through Ricardo, right on to the Cambridge economists. And we all loved listening to Dalton on the Cambridge economists, because he was a Cambridge man himself originally and he could never mention Pigou or Robertson or Marsh or any of the outstanding Cambridge economists without making a joke about how ridiculous they were [laughs], and how out of touch they were in this ivory tower they'd built for themselves, in Cambridge. I know when he was told that someone had changed a poster ... there was a poster up saying that there was going to be a public lecture by someone called Cox, a Cambridge economist who was going to lecture on 'Population' ... and someone had gone down and transposed the 'C' into 'P'. And he [Dalton] thought that was real funny. So did I for a matter of fact! [laughs]

And the sort of little circle ... I suppose the two that I saw most of to begin with, was a man Bill Sweet, who was reading geography, and came from Southend, and he went on to teach at one of the polytechnics in the west, Plymouth or Portsmouth, I am not sure which. And a man called Alan Dudley<sup>3</sup>, who came from Worcestershire. And he, after a few short jobs, went on to become an ambassador. And we saw a good deal of each other the first year or two. Less after that, because the circle widened a little to include Krishna Menon, the Indian

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<sup>3</sup> This was possibly the Alan Dudley involved in wartime propaganda and measurement of public opinion in the USA during WW2, aimed at maintaining good relations with the USA and possibly with the intention of bringing the US into the war. He does not appear to have been an ambassador, but may have been attached to the British Embassy. See: Henry Butterfield Ryan [\*The Vision of Anglo-America: The US-UK Alliance and the Emerging Cold War 1943-1946\*](#) (Cambridge UP, 1987)

communist leader, who was a very forceful figure. And the other man was Abba Lerner, who came from the East End, London, rather later in life ... He had been a presser in a tailor shop. And then someone said, "look you are too smart for this, why don't you get some sort of grant to go to the London School of Economics?" He did, and became an outstanding professor in the United States, a professor of economics. Those two were added to the group. But the outstanding addition was a man called Otto Berobach van de Sprekle<sup>4</sup>, who was the offspring of a Dutch father and a Malaysian woman [laughs]. And somehow he had more of his mother's looks about him than his father's. But he and I became great friends ... We used to go on holidays together. And he was always inventing ways of spending one's time doing non-work.

I remember, I think it was my first graduate year, after I had graduated, Otto said, "Did you know that term is going to start without Dalton's great inaugural lecture, open lecture, to freshers? How long is he going to be away? He's going to be away the whole week. So they postponed the lecture, the freshers will just have to start life without him." And Otto said, "If it is going to be a whole week and then he'll turn up on the Monday and give his lecture, none of the students will recognise him, will they? They won't know. But he'll be introduced." And Otto said, "Wouldn't it be funny if Dalton were kidnapped and one of us took his place on the platform?" [laughs] I said, "That'll be a terrific idea". Otto said, "I am glad you agree with me ... you do it!"

I thought, "Oh God, why didn't I keep my mouth shut?" I knew couldn't back out. I said

**Audio note**<sup>5</sup>

"Yea, sure, I'll do it, but somehow you've got to arrange for me to get a gown."

...Otto saying that I should simulate Dalton. Well fortunately I had heard the lecture three times, I knew all his jokes. They stole Professor Ginsberg's gown, because he was the shortest man on the staff and it therefore, it more or less fitted me ... and, by the time I reached the theatre where the lecture was going to be given, the word had spread ... every member of the staff was there including Beveridge. Every one of the porters, every one of the attendants at the lavatories there. I thought, "Oh God, what am I doing? What have I done?" And I thought, however, Otto said I've got to do it, so I better do it. I walked to the platform and stood up and welcomed them. Hoped they would have a fruitful, successful, time, followed by an equally fruitful, successful career. And then I gave them the first of

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<sup>4</sup> In Rebecca's interview he appears to call him Otto van Detman.

<sup>5</sup> End of tape 1/ Start of Tape 2 which was damaged at the time of recording (serious tape squeak). Audio file: MarkTape2-Track1

Dalton's standard jokes. There was a mild smile, a little titter ... I went on a bit about books they should read, and then I came to the second of Dalton's jokes. This got a better reception and then I went on and produced the third of the standard jokes -- this was at the expense of the Cambridge economists. That puzzled some of the students, but they laughed by now. At that point I looked up and Bill Sweet was standing at the back of the hall doing this [waving, laughs]. Apparently what had happened was that Dalton had turned up, gone to his room and they had arranged a relay of obstacles. As he was getting ready to go to give the lecture, someone had stopped him and said, "Oh, Professor Dalton I am so glad to have met you Dr. Dalton, I have a terrible problem, you must help me with this ... it will only take two or three minutes". And Dalton said, "All right come on in". So that had given me another three or four minutes. And then he came out and as he got to the top of the stairs, another student stopped him [laughs], but this couldn't go on for long. By the time the third student tried it, Dalton said, "I am sorry I am already late, come see me tomorrow". Bill Sweet waved. I said, "Oh, I am afraid I've got to stop my lecture there, I have rather an urgent appointment that I've forgotten all about, I'll see you all tomorrow". And there was a window at the back of the theatre and I hopped out of the window [laughs]... students were completely flabbergasted! And at that point Dalton walked in, to cheers from the faculty, who were already enjoying the thing. And he got up on the platform and welcomed them all ... wished them a happy successful career and then gave them his first joke, which they already knew. There was a roar of laughter... He thought, oh, it is going down well this year... The second joke they didn't let him finish ... they gave the punch line themselves!

*DA: He must have been so confused. Did you observe ... you waited to observe this?*

*MA: No, no Bill Sweet sat there. I couldn't get out of the well I'd jumped into without help [laughs]. And I went home afterwards. They told me it had been a great success ... they returned Ginsberg's gown to his room. I went home, I thought, "Now I ought to register at the Employment Exchange to get myself a job and do something, but I'll go to the school first anyway, collect my books and football boots that I left in the locker." The minute I opened the door at the LSE, the porter said, "Hey". I said, "What is it?" He said, "I've got a letter for you from Dr. Dalton". I said, "Oh, have you?" He said, "Yes, I was to give you as soon as you arrived". All right, I took it down to the lavatories and I opened the letter. It was a sheet of paper on which had been written – 'Congratulations. Hugh Dalton'. Wasn't that marvellous of him?!*

*DA: You must have been really relieved as well.*

*MA:* Oh, God and how? And when he came to write his autobiography, he mentions this incident. He said, "I am convinced that Mark Abrams will go far." [laughs] So that was Otto.

And again, Otto took me off to Salzburg ... which was an absolutely marvellous experience for me ... we didn't see much of world-level opera in Edmonton! So going to Salzburg was quite a thing. But Otto had an obsession with toy soldiers. So, as we left Salzburg to go north, he began spending his money on lead, tin toy soldiers. And when he spent all his money, he said to me, "Mark how much money have you got left?". And I parted with it, and so I had no money left, and he said, "Don't worry. In Amsterdam I've got an uncle. And he's rich ... all I've got to do is knock on the door and your purse is full, my purse is full ...we will live again." So, I said, "Okay". So we got to the railway station at Amsterdam, and Otto called up a taxi, gave the taxi driver his uncle's address, and off we went. Otto said to the taxi driver (because he could speak Dutch well), "Wait." While we were at the door we knocked, and we knocked and we knocked and then finally someone from next door said, "Who is it you want?". Otto told them. He said, "Oh, I think your uncle is away in Switzerland on a holiday. There is no one there!" Fortunately, Otto was able to get enough money from her to pay the taxi driver and we went walking until the morning. Then in the morning, we went to uncle's office, and explained our position to the finance officer. He said, "I've got no authority to give you money to go anywhere. The most I can do is, I can give you money for food, and money to spend a night in a cheap place. And that's about as far as I can go. Possibly your uncle will be back tomorrow, day after, and can clarify matters, and he will perhaps advance you money to get back to England." Okay. Next day, same thing happened. Uncle still not back. Otto said, "Alright, we will just walk around. And so we passed a place, Otto said, "Let's go in and have a drink". I said, "You're crazy, we've got no money for a drink!". He said, "Don't be silly. Come on in". We went in and had beers, and Otto finished his and said, "Now Mark, I want you to go and stand at the door and hold the door open while I explain to the bartender that we've got no money, but make sure the door is open". So Otto went to the bartender and, before the bartender could jump over the counter, Otto was out of the open door, and I was with him. And we ran and ran and ran, until we were sure that no one could catch up with us. The next day we went to uncle's office

#### **Audio Note<sup>6</sup>**

*DA:* Now where were we? ... you and Otto were ...

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<sup>6</sup> Tape sticking here. Audio file: MarkTape 2-Track 2

MA: Well, on the third day we turned up at uncle's office and the finance officer said, "Stop, I've bought you two air plane tickets to take you back to London. If you get a bus straightaway it will take you to the airport and you can be back in London in two hours' time". We said, "What about sandwiches?" He said, "I've bought some sandwiches for you ... here they are". And that was Otto.

DA: Sounds like a pretty wicked character, who could have ended up in prison or something?

MA: No, he ended up as a professor of political philosophy in Australia.

DA: Oh well, they always send that sort of person ... criminals and vagabonds.

MA: But anyway, after that I needed a job, having got my PhD, Tawney was my supervisor.

DA: What was your PhD on?

MA: Oh God, it was on *The Origins of the Industrial Revolution*. It dealt with the royal monopolies granted at the beginning of the 17th century to courtiers, some of whom simply made a lot of money and wasted it, spent it on women, and so on ... and some of whom regarded it as a possible nest egg to invest in what was to become the industrial revolution. And that is what I did my thesis on.