

I would not have known I had been excommunicated had it not been for the news reports. The three rabbis, holding court in November 1982 at a motel in Tewksbury, Massachusetts, had blown mightily on a ram's horn and had then snuffed the candles, thereby extinguishing the spiritual lives of those once and former Jews on their list. The rabbis used as their text—the *Washington Post* reported—“the 1757 excommunication of a Jewish heretical group called the Satanic Sabbatian Frankists in Brode, Poland.”

My link with the Satanic Sabbatian Frankists was my having signed a June 20 advertisement in the *New York Times* that year protesting Israel's invasion of Lebanon. I had therefore been charged by the rabbinical triumvirate of “collaboration with the enemy and committing a traitorous act.”

Not for the first time, and not only by rabbis.

I only wished the three rabbis really had the authority to hold that court, that Bet Din. But rabbis these days have no power except over their own congregations, and that power can be removed, along with the rabbi, at the will of the congregation.

Ah, but had this been a true court, and had the rabbis believed that each Jew, however Satanic, must be given due process, they would have summoned me to that motel

room, and I would have come. And I would have told them about my life as a heretic, a tradition I keep precisely because I am a Jew, and a tradition I was strengthened in because I came to know certain jazz musicians at so early an age that they, not unwittingly, were my chief rabbis for many years.

And in that motel room, I would be excommunicated nonetheless, for what could Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus mean to that court of assizes? But I would have been there, and I would have made my mark.

When the first Jews from Eastern Europe came, with their herrings and black bread, to Boston in 1882, they were told to go away. They were told this by the embarrassed German Jews of the city, who were afraid that the Brahmins might make some connection between these greenhorns and the true Jewish gentlemen and ladies of Boston. The first contingent of Eastern Europeans was thereupon shipped off to New York, which, God knows, would accept anything. But other Jews from Russia and Latvia and Hungary and Rumania and all those unfortunate places kept coming anyway, and stayed. Among them were Simon Hentoff (born in Wolkowysk, USSR, my FBI files tell me) and Lena Katzenberg (born, the FBI says, in Minsk, USSR — the FBI apparently considers Russia to have always been Bolshevik, for my parents left while the tsar still ruled).

I was their firstborn. As I learned quite soon, the German Jews were not the only Bostonians who wished that we Ostjuden had debarked elsewhere, far elsewhere. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge had proclaimed, without fear of political reprisal, that these immigrants and their progeny

were “inferior.” And Henry Brooks Adams, grandson of John Quincy Adams, had written of the “furtive Ysaac or Jacob still reeking of the Ghetto . . . snarling a weird Yiddish. . . . The Jew makes me creep.”

It is no wonder, at least to me, that I was in my late teens before I dared go inside Brooks Brothers in Boston. The name, the look of the place, the look of the salespeople I saw through the window, all signaled that they would smell the ghetto on me and not make me welcome.

It was in this city — so admired by many who have never lived there — that I grew up. From the age of six, in a three-story apartment house on Howland Street in Roxbury. Once a neighboring town, Roxbury had been annexed by the city in 1867, and by the 1930s most of its churches had been transformed into synagogues. Its main shopping thoroughfare, Blue Hill Avenue, had such distinctive sights for tourists (had there been any) as an authentic herring man from the old country, standing stolidly but watchfully in the street next to a huge barrel of herrings. With his leather cap and bulky leather jacket, he was always there, sun and snow, early in the morning and in the twilight when it was time for me to hurry home to hear “Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy” on the radio.

Tourists could also have seen small rabbis with very long beards, bristling boys swapping baseball cards, snapping them as if they were whips and then sliding the cards into their shirts as one of the small rabbis asked why they were not in cheder, in Hebrew school. Also visible on most days was a large, round, empty boy being wheeled about by his mother, who had warned him and warned him not to go out alone at night. And she had been so right — but she

would never hear her sweet sixteen-year-old admit it, because he had been left in the gutter with an ice pick in his head. For what? What do you mean, for what? Nobody had to ask that question in my neighborhood.

**M**y street, Howland Street, was not entirely Jewish. Toward the end of its four-block length were a number of black families. They had to walk past where we lived to catch the trolley car for Boston proper. We saw the same travelers every day, every month. But we never nodded or spoke to them, nor they to us. On our part of the street, they were referred to, not unkindly, as schwartzes. Not unkindly, because these schwartzes were clean, neat, and properly purposeful. But they *were* colored.

I lived on that street until I was nineteen, but only once was I allowed into one of the Negro homes. Through mutual friends across town, in a bohemian neighborhood of the Back Bay, I had gotten to know a fiercely intellectual Negro aesthete who seldom talked of race because he was training to be a universalist. And so he also seldom talked about himself. It was months before he told me he lived on Howland Street, and months more before he asked if I'd like to meet his great-grandfather. Born a slave nearly a hundred years before, the ancient man, I was told with an expectant smile, had read his way through whole libraries.

Small, startlingly thin, straight as a steel ruler, the for-

mer slave sat staring at me until I wondered desperately what I was supposed to say. Then, his tight bronze face still impassive, he said he knew I had gone to Boston Latin School and also had taken Greek. Accordingly, he asked my views on Homer, saying what a great pleasure it must be to read him in the original. Not having found it any sort of pleasure, because Greek had been taught like math at Boston Latin School, I mumbled my memory of exaltation.

After a while, emboldened by not having made a complete fool of myself (or so I thought), I asked *him* some questions. He was so old that surely he must have known, or heard stories about, the grand masters of Negro music: King Oliver, Duke Ellington, and way, way back, maybe, just maybe, Buddy Bolden. Could it be possible — why not? — that he might have actually heard that New Orleans cornettist-barber who went mad before there was anything to record him on?

The ancient man, without moving, flicked my questions away. And me as well.

“It’s not your fault,” the great-grandson said outside, “but I think he was kind of insulted. As if the only music he’d know anything about would be jazz.”

“Does he know anything about jazz?”

The great-grandson smiled. “He’d never admit it if he did.”

A tall, burly, dark-haired man with a riverboat gambler’s long, flowing moustache, he keeps the windows of his first-floor apartment open all year long, except during blizzards and the more aggressive rainstorms. Music jumps through those windows as soon as he is up in the morning and until he leaves

for work — “The Mooche,” “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo,” “Potato Head Blues,” “Sent for You Yesterday, But Here You Come Today.” Dark, growling trumpets; glistening cornets; smearing, mocking trombones; deep-blue clarinets — wickedly brash schwartze sounds to inflict on this Jewish block at the end of Howland Street hour after hour.

The riverboat gambler often sees me standing outside his window. On the street he is brusque, because he is always late to work. And I see him at no other time because he comes home at all hours of the night, as my mother says. But how does she know?

In time, as I begin to collect records myself, I learn to recognize most of the soloists streaming out of his window: Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Cootie Williams, Tricky Sam Nanton. And him, the dark-haired white man. Taking out his trombone, he often plays along with the records. His swaggering improvising is accented — the cadences are Yiddish — but it fits. Even when he sounds like he’s bringing the circus to town.

When he left the house, swinging his trombone case, I’d wonder where he went to. Nobody in the neighborhood seemed to know. But I found out. Cutting classes at Boston Latin School one Monday morning, several friends and I race to the Old Howard on Scollay Square, Boston’s — indeed, New England’s — premier burlesque house. We have come to see Georgia Southern twist, glare, bump, and bite the air; and as we stare with mounting lust, I am insidiously distracted by a most familiar serenade — Tricky Sam Nanton’s solo on “The Mooche.” I look into the pit and there, playing that swivel-hipped solo, is my jazz-crazy neighbor, who winks at me.