



The Recollections of Harold Lun | A museum of Soho Archive

At the start of the war, my father took Chinese nationality and was given the name "Lun". His birth name was "Chow", and so from birth, childhood etc up until the start of the war he would have been known as Harold Chow.

Celia Davis (Daughter)



Dear Sir,

One often notices in your magazine references to "Soho-ites", sounding rather exclusive and cosy as in the obituary notice on Peter Bravo, an old school-mate of mine at St. Annes' School in the 1930s.

But, believe it or not, incredible as it may seem, it is possible to be a "Soho-ite", as you call it, while being unlucky enough to live elsewhere. There are many oldsters who would have given their eye teeth to have ended their days in the area in which they grew up, in whose streets they played as children in the final golden years before the War. To them the mere mention of Soho brings a pang to the heart and a tear to the eye. People like my old school friend Elso Gaida who ended up in Churchill Gardens after a life-time in Richmond Buildings, another school chum John Solieri (dead now) who was exiled to Camden Town, and whose father died of the legendary broken-heart

after being put out to Limlco by an un-feeling and bullying Westminster City Council after 40 years in Dean Street

And yours truly, who lived in Gt. Chapel Street and Wardour Street before the War, Bateman Street in the 50s and latterly, until 1969, nine wonderful years in Kemp House in Berwick Street, and finished up in detested Marylebone.

Fate played unkind tricks on us and many others. Leaving Soho changes one's life.

But we are as much "Soho-ites", perhaps more so, than many living there to-day, those yuppies, business entrepreneurs and the like, who merely think Soho is a trendy place to be but who don't really understand it.

So spare a thought for us lost souls who remember the real, the true Soho, as it was, before 1939 and the War swept it away for ever, and who will never come home to Soho again.

Yours etc.

Harold Lun.

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Jan. 17. 1988.

Dear Mr. Burrough,

Thank you for going to the trouble to acknowledge my recent letter lamenting a lost Soho. I put down most of what I felt in that letter, and there is not much more I can add, having made my plaintive gesture.

In view of your un-expected interest, however, it occurs to me you might care to have a few more personal details for the files or archives, or whatever, if only to show the sort of people living in Soho in the Thirties. It may or may not be typical.

My father was a member of the Chinese community, a chef by trade. If you walk down Wardour Street to-day, pause opposite N^o 17 and look up at the top of the building. You will see the single word Pinoli carved in the stonework. This means nothing to passers-by, and it is probably never even noticed, but it is all that remains of one of the great and famous Soho Italian restaurants. Here it was that my father worked for a time after the first World War. In those days businesses were (like the Empire) built to last, and it was common practice for firms' names to be engraved onto the house-fronts, un-like the cheap, plastic, easily-removal fascias one sees nowadays over shop-fronts. My father also worked for some years at Hey On's Chinese restaurant at 72 Wardour Street. Mr. Hey On, in addition to being a restaurateur, was also a small part actor, much in demand for rôles as sinister orientals in films of that time.

My mother was an un-happy Welshwoman who had gone adrift, somehow, in London after a broken marriage. She was something of a lost soul, most of the time I remember her, given to inexplicable fits of crying, in-explicable to my childish eyes in those days. Now, of course, I realise she was probably breaking her heart over the memory of her happy youth in Wales, gone forever.

Being from different cultures with nothing in common, they fought violently like cat and dog. One of my earliest recollections (I must have been about 3 or 4) is of sitting on our coal-box in the passage, clutching our terrified black cat, both of us waiting for the shouting and screaming to cease. This was in the very late twenties when we were living in Gt. Chappel Street. Why they continued to live together I can never understand, unless it was for the sake of their little illegitimate offspring, the under-signed. These are not things I have cared to re-call for many years, but it is too late in the day for it to matter any more.

Nevertheless, it made me a strong opponent of mixed marriages for the rest of my life, almost a racist. Races do differ from each other. That was one of the first things you discovered living in Soho. Each ethnic group had its' own characteristics, its



Harold Lun aged 7.

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own way of looking at things, its own political and cultural conditioning. Doubtless it goes deeper than most people realise, and is a genetic matter, and therefore unchangeable. This is not a digression. It is what one small boy learned growing up in Soho, and like all strong lessons, it was learned the hard way.

My mother let rooms in 47, Chapel Street and we had an interesting variety of lodgers; I remember a young man who played the cello, an un-employed actor named William Freshman, a young lady who was an usherette at the Dominion Cinema and used to get us free tickets, a tough Maltese man who bullied his frightened English wife un-mercifully; she would often run terrified into the street during their rows. Yet, paradoxically, he was a kind-hearted man who would often repair my home-made scooter for me when it had broken down.

Street traders and buskers were very plentiful then. Three elderly musicians would come and play regularly outside the house. I remember one of their pieces to this day: "The Grasshopper's Dance" by Bucalossi. There was the old Italian lady in a headscarf with her barrel-organ, two men who did a comedy tap-dance routine, the Punch and Judy man who came every Saturday evening and put on a show at the top end of the street outside St. Patrick's School. The little dog Toby in the act was a real trained animal. Vendors included the old Jewish Beigel seller (Beigels were a kind of roll) the cat's-meat man (Mr. Byfield) the oil-man, the coal-man; there was a lamplighter, and so on.

But my mother, never a robust woman, gradually found the task of looking after the house, single-handed, too much for her, and we eventually (about 1935) moved to the top floor at 72, Wardour Street, over the On's Chinese restaurant.

Our landlord was a Mr. Ernest Hocking who had his estate office further along Wardour Street. His secretary was a severe-looking middle-aged spinster, whose intimidating exterior concealed a good heart. She it was who first introduced me to Dickens, when she gave me a copy of "Oliver Twist" for my birthday. On that top floor in Wardour Street, I first became aware of some of the things and influences which have lasted throughout my life. From "Oliver Twist" I went on to the "Pickwick Papers" "A Christmas Carol" Eliot's "The Mill on the Floss" (recommended by our headmaster Mr. Reece) Hugo's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" "Reveries" "The Cloister and the Hearth" and the wonderful Greyfriars school tales by Frank Richards featuring Billy Bunter, Harry Wharton & Co..

There was no television in those days, thank goodness, although its birth-pangs were



Harold Lun aged 8.

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taking place discreetly somewhere, but we had a radio, worked by an accumulator, on which I first heard much that went to make up some of the better things in my life. It was at Wardour Street that I first heard Beethoven conducted by Toscanini. The great Italian maestro visited England about that time, and had made several recordings with the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, which were frequently given an airing on the "wireless", as we called it then. My love of books and music came out of Soho.

There were several schools in the community in those days, and the one I attended was St. Anne's Church of England School in Dean Street, commencing as an infant in 1930, and finishing as a senior boy aged fourteen in 1939. My leaving school coincided with the outbreak of War. The discipline at this establishment was Victorian by to-day's standards. The cane was in frequent use, to say nothing of the odd cuff round the ear. But the teachers were great and principled people, and never un-fair. I did suffer at the hands of some of my school mates, partly because of my origins ("Son of a Chink" was one of the more popular epithets bestowed on me) and partly because I was no good at games. But, looking back, I see that this, together with the discipline, was not without value, since it taught me at an early age not to expect too much of the world when things got tough.

I was a reasonable scholar and trusted. I was once given the task of taking a little girl called Toni to the now vanished Dental Clinic* (now a Chinese super market) in Gerrard Street for treatment. You could do things like that in those days. Who to-day would entrust the care of a girl of about seven to a boy of thirteen? Also in Gerrard Street, incidentally, was what was in the seventeenth century the old Admiralty and I remember the coat of arms above the door at No 36. This has also vanished of course, and the whole street is now reminiscent of Hong Kong.

Borwick Street Market was just across the road from where we lived. In the thirties it was mainly a Jewish market. Today, most of the stalls seem to be run by young yobbish-looking males who might have the odd criminal record in their backgrounds.

The newsagents, many run by Italians before the War, have, for the most part, been taken over by Pakistanis. I believe Moroni's in Old Compton Street is the last surviving pre-War family of newsagents in Soho.

We were a poor family. I had no pocket money. Saturday night was a special treat in the Wardour Street days, because it meant fish and chips from the restaurant across the road in Peter Street. A bar of chocolate once a week was for me a luxury. But, perhaps to

* No 9



Class 1930

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compensate for the continual parental fights at home I was rich in things of the mind. In between lulls, I was an avid listener to the radio, not only Beethoven, but good plays, Ronald Seire in Somerset Maugham's "The Breadwinner", Terence de Marney in "The Cloister and the Hearth". Who remembers these now? It was the day of the great dance bands, Henry Hall, Lew Stone, Jack Payne, Carroll Gibbons; stars like Jessie Matthews, Will Hay, Arthur Askey, Ivor Novello were household sounds in the top floor at N°72. Each evening, after school, there was Children's Hour (Toytown, Larry the Lamb). This was when children were still children, not miniature adults playing space games. And there was a cup of hot cocoa or Ovaltine before going to bed. My parents never ill-treated me. My father bought me my first bike, my first paint box, my mother, pathetically, used to send me a card at Christmas and on my birthday, actually through the post. They just shouldn't have been living together.

We children of Soho also spent a great deal of our lives outside our homes. We played in the quieter streets, such as Gt. Chapel Street, Richmond Buildings (the scene of many a firework party on Guy Fawkes night) Carlisle Street, and the gardens in Wardour Street by St. Anne's Church. Sometimes, we would be invaded by a group of rough boys from another area known as the Neal Street Gang. Our toys consisted mainly of scooters and footballs for the boys, and skipping ropes and hoops for the girls. Meard Street was another popular meeting place for us, as was Diadem Court, both leading into the busier Dean Street, with its School, Leon's Quo Vadis Italian restaurant, and the famous Royalty Theatre, where, I remember, a play by J.B. Priestley called "I Have Been Here Before" was being shown. It was at the Royalty back in the Nineties, that Brandon Thomas's great farce "Charley's Aunt" was first staged, becoming a re-sounding success and saving the failing theatre from closure.

The main Catholic school in Soho was St. Patrick's in Gt. Chapel Street, and many children from the Italian community attended there. This was at the time of the high peak of Mussolini's power in Italy, and on certain evenings, each week, meetings were held for local Italian children who belonged to a Fascist youth organisation called the Ballila, and I well recall seeing girls and boys in uniform going to the meetings, which always ended with the singing of the Fascist Anthem Giovinezza.

There was nothing subversive or sinister in this. It was merely a continental version



Class 1934

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of the British Girl Guide or Boy Scout movements, although when War came, I know of at least one of my Italian schoolmates who was interned as an enemy alien.

Looking at Soho to-day and wandering through the streets, it may be difficult to realise that in the Thirties it was a residential area, with its own churches, restaurants, shops and schools. The district bounded by Oxford Street, Charing Cross Road, Regent Street and Shaftesbury Avenue was scattered with families, and to give some idea of what has been lost, and at the risk of seeming a tedious bore, I will mention a few of the streets and the families I knew in them. In St. Anne's Court were the Feigenblatts and Gafsens both Jewish. In Richmond Buildings Italian families like the Gaidas, the Solieris, the Pozzis, Chinese families like the Sings, the Wong and the Koons, whose eldest son, a schoolmate of mine, later became the proprietor of the Chinese restaurant in Piccadilly. In Wardour Street lived the Nowells, the Goldsteins (Jewish) the Pinos (Italian) the Chows (Chinese). In Old Compton Street Italian families such as the Desimones, the Bravos, the Parmigianis the Camisas.

In Greek Street the Fermans, the Davises (Jewish). In Dean Street the Levines (Jewish) and the Stewarts. In Carlisle Street the Hydes, the Basaldellas (Italian). In Peter Street, the Sheenes and the Morosolis (Italian) and the Reyes (Spanish). In Meard Street the Watermans (Jewish) the Fields and the Ginos (Italian). In Noel Street the Gordons (Jewish). In Gt. Chapel Street the Holmans, the Brays, the Boretas and the Negris (both Italian). In Diadem Court the Cohens (Jewish) the Holditchs, and little Toni's family. In Little Titchfield Street (now Fareham Street) the Teranzanis (Italian). In Brewer Street the Rotondos and the Salussolias (Italian). In Wivonia Street the Jones and the Gascoignes, in Longinon Street the Vavruskas (Czech) and the Giulios (Italian), in Silver Place the Bakers, in Marshall Street the Sealys and the Pines, in Newport Buildings the Montinaris (Italian).

Perhaps some of these names may be familiar to you in the Soho Society, but I doubt it. They were only birds of passage in the Thirties, but to me they will always be here, and I have only mentioned the ones I knew personally from school. There were countless others. There will never be another Soho. It was not the mere friendly atmosphere, either. Friendliness, after all, is a superficial quality, and may be found anywhere. It was the unique aura, an indefinable something. You sensed it as soon as you came into it from Oxford Street or Regent Street, and once you left it, and got out into the busy main roads, you were in the wilderness again. The unrivalled cosmopolitan mix, the village-like atmosphere, the self-contained little community, was only a once in a life-time thing.

The nearest equivalent I know in the West End today is Shepherd Market in Mayfair,



Class 1938

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but this misses Soho's "foreign" feel and appearance. Montmartre in Paris might be a closer comparison.

But as the Thirties draw to a close, ominous rumblings from the larger world outside began to be felt, which would end things not only for us in Soho, but for all Europe. There was talk of gas-masks, air raid precautions, civil defence, air raid shelters, plans for evacuation. At the time of the Munich crisis I can remember seeing the Swastika flying over the German Embassy in Carlton House Terrace, probably the only occasion when Hitler achieved this in England. When War finally came, I was listening with my mother and a Chinese waiter from Ley On's, to Prime Minister Chamberlain's broadcast on our wireless in the top-floor at Wardour Street on that fateful Sunday morning at eleven o'clock. Nightly air-raids began, and the garage at the bottom of Peter Street, opposite the school, was turned into a large shelter. Many nights we spent in that shelter, un-able to sleep, and sometimes going up to listen to that peculiar drone of the German aircraft, and see the search-lights and ^{hear the} thud of bombs and anti-aircraft guns stationed in Green Park and Hyde Park. Many families moved away to safer areas away from the West End. One night a bomb fell on that precious Georgian relic of Old Soho, Carlisle House, destroying it completely and the father and two sons of the Hyde family who were manning the ARP post in the basement. Another boy, Victor Basaldella, a Junior Air-Raid Warden, happened to be standing outside, and died at the same moment. Some of our boys joined up; the two Desimone sons went into the British Army. The elder lost an eye. Lucas Reyes the Spanish boy likewise joined the army and never came back. Another Italian schoolmate, Umberto Morasoli, went into the mines as a "Bevin boy". The Blitz claimed another Soho landmark one night, when our school church St. Annes, was hit. An atmosphere of hatred began to be felt in the once-happy streets. When Italy entered the War in 1940 on Hitler's side, the English, never too fond of foreigners at the best of times, openly turned on Italian businesses in the area, smashing shop windows, chalking slogans, and the like. Many Italian men were interned, although posing no security threat. Similarly, when Japan entered the War, many Chinese in Soho were at risk, as the English not being perceptive enough to know the difference, went for anything with an Oriental face. There was near-panic among many of the Jewish population at the time of Dunkirk, because a German invasion really seemed to be the next item on the agenda.



Aged 12



Father Yap Chow



Mother Margaret Baker

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By the time the War ended in 1945, too much had happened to Soho for it ever to be the same again. Grim and battered, the mood had changed. It was just a question of picking up the pieces. And when the people who were left, had begun to find their feet again, it was a different world.

We left Soho at the end of 1940, one of the worst things that happened to me in my life. I had been reasonably happy at 72, Wardour Street. Being on a top-floor, with no neighbour noise overhead, had meant I had been able to indulge in peace the home pursuits that most interested me as a boy. Both my parents died in Soho, my father, suddenly, one evening at a Chinese Working Men's Club in Bateman Street in 1953, and my mother at Kemp House in Berwick Street, in 1969. My own children went to school for a short while in the 60's at St. Patrick's in Gt. Chapel Street, then on its last legs.

It will be seen, therefore, that Soho has played a great part in my life, and I am hoping to return one day. I am in touch with the Westminster City Council to this end, but that august body is not known for its compassion, imagination, or humanity, as I have found to my cost. But now my own children are grown up (and breaking up) I no longer feel bound to tolerate living in East Marylebone. Once you have lived in Soho you are a fish out of water anywhere else.

By the way, my previous letter contained one error. I referred to the locals gathering in Soho Square in the Thirties. This was incorrect, and I was confusing the place then with what it is today. In those days it was not open to the public, except on special occasions just before the War, when a couple of Soho fairs were held there. A vain attempt was made to re-vive this in the Fifties, but it had an air of futile pathos about it, rather reminiscent of the clubs one reads about, where elderly gentlemen dress up as Cavaliers and Roundheads and re-live the Battle of Naseby or some such.

I was interested to hear that Miss E. Stewart works for the Soho Society. I was in the same class room with her younger sister Dorothy in the Junior Mixed Department at St. Annes, somewhere around 1937.

Although not an official member of the Society, I hope I have written enough to convince you that, while it would be an irrelevancy for me to join, as I am no longer a member of the community, I am, in my heart, a loyal and loving supporter, and always have been and always will be, wherever I finally end up. Soho will always be Home.

My apologies for such a long letter. I only hope you may get some interest out of it.

Yours Faithfully,

Harold Lun



Restaurant Kitchen