



Susan Bookbinder

CHRISTMAS is an evocative time for everyone, regardless of religion or nationality, because it brings childhood memories flooding back

It is the build up which takes me back to one of my earliest memories:

I cannot have been 10-years-old because my brother John was still a toddler and I remember hearing the creek of the stairs as my dad David crept out of the house at 4am on his way to the Birmingham Bullring Market.

It was part of a wholesale, retail and manufacturing confectionery business he had built up from the age of 17.

He had bought a van for £19 and set up a sweet stall on Salford Market with his friend Murray Walters and some credit from the Manchester-based wholesaler, Aubrey Paul.

All three were Cheetham Hill lads who had become successful businessmen, having started on the markets with less than nothing.

Dad had spent most of my early life touring the UK, sleeping in the van as he queued for pitches on markets across the country, from Bury — where teenaged Manchester City legend Colin Bell would help him load the van for half a crown — to Barrow-in-Furness and North Wales.

Securing a permanent pitch on Derby's Cockpit Hill Market was the reason he and my mother

Fascinated by the world he described

Mary set up home in the grimy Midlands town in the 1960s.

Here, dad was to become a successful businessman and a leading political figure, who would transform a somewhat shabby Derby into a decent place to live by, among other visionary acts, negotiating the deal which secured the UK's biggest inward investment, with the location of the Toyota Motor Corporation's British operation just outside Derby.

But in 1974, Birmingham was a key stall for us and in the run up to Christmas, Dad would be away from very early in the morning until late at night.

I was fascinated by the world he had described and determined to find out more.

I remember insisting that I accompany him to help on the market and once I had persuaded my mother that I could withstand the cold, there was no going back.

It was nothing like the markets we see today, which are usually indoor and even heated.

Birmingham in the 70s was a hard, cold city. I remember seeing the rats scurrying around the fruit and veg stalls first thing and late at night when we were packing up.

Swarms of people would replace the rats and we would be trading from before 8am until 9pm in the run up to Christmas.

We had two stalls joined together, one with a vibrant avalanche of sweets; coconut mushrooms, cinder toffee, chocolate drops, jelly babies, raisins and dolly mixtures — all cascading down to the pick 'n' mix.

Dad left gelt from gaff in phone box



LABOUR OF LOVE: David Bookbinder with then Labour leader Neil Kinnock in the 1990s

The other stall was dedicated to boxes of chocolates, liquors and fruit jellies which we sold in huge hampers, priced at £1 or £5.

These hampers would be made up by my father, who stood on a platform we made out of pallets we'd borrowed from the fruit traders, so that he would tower above the customers and encourage them to form a crowd around the stall, as he placed box after box in the carrier bags.

It was my job to pass up the stock to the platform as he would describe, in eloquent detail, each box and its delicious contents; what a divine present they would make he would suggest, dramatically breaking the chocolate casing of the liqueurs and pouring the cherry brandy to the floor to demonstrate the fantastic quality and value for money on offer.

Using pitch and pause and perfect timing, in a commanding and energetic performance that saw the crowd pushing forward to hear what he had to say, he would wait a crucial second — expertly creating anticipation and palpable excitement, before moving to the pricing section of the pitch.

"That's not 10, not five not four or three or two, ladies and gentlemen, I'll just ask you for . . . (pausing and then with a raised tone) I'll take a pound the lot."

I will never forget the sight of the crowd surging forward towards us, with pound notes shooting into the air as they rushed to grab the incredible bargain.

Sometimes I could not keep up the supply of chocolate boxes with the demand and I guess that was my first taste of pressure to meet a deadline.

Going for breakfast with the other traders, while dad's assistant Paddy manned the stall, was one of the highlights for me.

Many of them, like David Simons, Alan Solinger and Henry Erstling, were out of the same mould as my father and Murray — hardworking Jewish boys who had made it big in business but could still roll their sleeves up and pull a pitch.

By that I should explain that I do

not mean the sort of business pitch I am involved in today, which starts with an email and an attachment and followed up with lunch and a conference call.

No, pulling a pitch on the Birmingham Bullring Market was a much harder and more demanding task, both physically and intellectually.

You were competing against several other flamboyant characters who would gather a crowd around them and entertain them sufficiently to keep their attention and persuade them to part with their cash.

To fully understand what I mean about the pitching, I need to introduce you to a fascinating phenomenon, which still exists on the surviving traditional outdoor markets today.

Father not forgotten Cheetham Hill

I called it 'market language'; a dialect exclusive to market traders.

Ok, so are you ready for a quick lesson in market language? You may recognise some of the words because it's a language which has its roots in Yiddish, due to the Jewish traders who used to dominate the markets in this country.

The market is the 'gaff' and the stall which we joined together from the iron bars is the 'joint'.

The traders are 'grafters', the 'gear' being sold could be either 'ream' (fabulous) or 'pony' (rubbish) or even 'schmutter'!

If some children were causing trouble near your joint, you would advise your assistant to 'clear the kinder'.

The rent collector was the 'toby'. On the way to breakfast, we would 'clock the bats' — or check out the prices of opposition traders and 'mind the gelt', when some heavy looking guys started targeting various joints on the

gaff, trying to steal our takings.

On the matter of the gelt, I remember travelling home one Saturday night and my Dad was so happy because we had taken £1,000, so he stopped at a phone box on the Tyburn Road coming out of Birmingham to ring my mum to tell her.

It wasn't until we were halfway back to Derby that he realised, he had left the 'till' with all the 'gelt' within, inside one of the busiest phone boxes in Birmingham.

He turned the van around and we raced back with our hearts in our mouths — and to this day, I will never forget the look of relief on my father's face as he emerged from that phone box with the gelt, complete and undisturbed in his hand.

I was recently talking to the father of one of my son Zac's friends. He is Indian and, like me, grew up on the gaff.

He is from Bury but his father moved the family down to the East End of London to trade on the famous Petticoat Lane Market, where — to this day — Asian families converse in market language with the Jewish traders.

My father was one of the stars of the gaff — or the star as far as I was concerned.

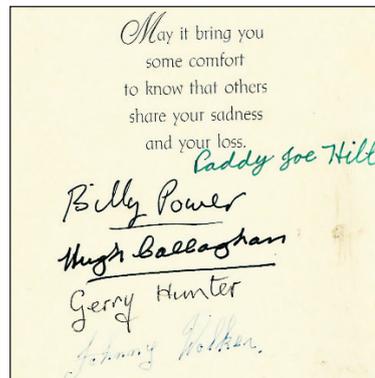
It was not only his entertaining performance but his unique style in which he combined his selling skills with his strongly held political convictions.

Most of the successful Jewish boys on the gaff, who had started in similar humble and challenging circumstances to my father, saw themselves as capitalists and had become Conservatives.

My father had not forgotten the streets of Cheetham Hill, where, during his childhood, people were selling their furniture on the pavements to finance their next meal.

People used to come to the market just to hear him speak and having a go at Ted Heath and the embattled Conservative government.

Meanwhile he was running a very successful enterprise and was the first British businessman to import chocolates from the Eastern Bloc, including Russia and Czechoslovakia.



CONDOLENCES: A sympathy card sent to David by five of the Birmingham Six when Mary died



ON THE GAFF: Susan, left, on the market stall with assistant Pat

It has only recently crystallised in my mind how my father was mixing business and socialism, in a way that people just could not comprehend.

It was a very popular and successful blend of socialism which, when he became more involved in politics as leader of Derbyshire County Council, enormously benefited the people of the county with the Toyota deal and the best Social Services in the country.

A serious memory of those market days came flooding back when Prime Minister David Cameron stated a few weeks ago that he is considering calls to re-open the case of the 1974 IRA Birmingham bombings, which killed 21 people and left nearly 200 injured.

The family of Maxine Hamble-

Language has its roots in Yiddish

don, who was just 18 when she was killed, has joined forces with Paddy Hill, one of the wrongly convicted Birmingham Six, in an attempt to finally discover who really carried out the atrocity.

We would pick up our assistant, Paddy Murphy, at 5am at a bus stop on the Tyburn Road and drop him off at the same place at night.

Luckily, my dad was able to testify to this when he was called into the police station by Paddy on the night after the bombings, when Paddy — along with many other Irish residents of Birmingham — had been rounded up by West Midlands Police.

I guess that set the scene for my parents' tireless backing for the Birmingham Six, despite some very unpleasant attacks on my father for doing so in some sections of the media.

When their convictions were quashed at the Court of Appeal in 1991, I was able to interview another member of the Six, Hugh Callaghan, as a reporter for ITN.

It concentrated my mind to think back to the little girl on the market at the Birmingham Bullring and how so much had happened in those 16 years, while he had wrongly been incarcerated and denied the joy of seeing his own family grow up.

I remain proud that my family had been part of the campaign to exonerate them and secure their freedom.

I am also proud of the contradictory combination of capitalism and socialism which brands my family. It all began with pitching our ream gear in market language on the gaff.