

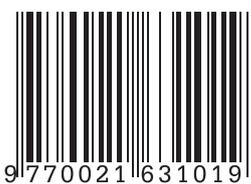
JEWISH AFFAIRS

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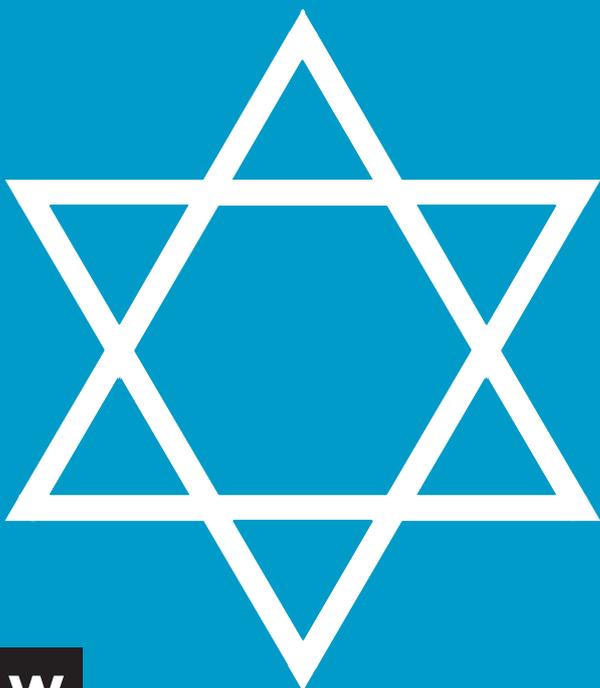


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THE ART OF SAMUEL BAK

*

Ute Ben Yosef

In November this year, South Africa's Mother City will have the privilege of hosting an exhibition of paintings by the eminent artist Samuel Bak. It is being brought to these shores by the Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA, and hosted by the South African Jewish Museum. Bak is an internationally acclaimed artist of upheaval and displacement. His work is based on his personal experience of the great catastrophe he experienced as a child in Vilna, Lithuania, where he was born in 1933.

Bak's message should resonate not only with Cape Town's Jewish citizens, many of whose families originated in Lithuania, but among all its residents. Throughout the years, ever since its establishment as a Dutch settlement in 1652, Cape Town's inhabitants have been placed in the roles of victims, persecutors and bystanders, with human rights abuses taking place as a matter of course. It began with its original inhabitants, the Khoisan, being driven out by the Dutch East Indian Company settlers. Thereafter, slaves were brought into the colony from Java and Madagascar. It culminated in a society constituted along lines of legalised racism, with the roles of workers and overlords being determined by skin colour.

During the 19th Century, waves of settlers arrived in Cape Town from Holland, Germany, Britain and other European countries. This included many Jews, mainly coming from Eastern Europe. After 1948 the Apartheid era, with its dream of permanently entrenching white supremacy, enforced the removals of people into designated group areas along racial lines, leaving a legacy of trauma and emotional upheaval from which the city has yet to heal. When this nightmare was over and democracy was established, people streamed in from other parts of the African continent fleeing wars and genocide. They came from Rwanda, the Congo, Kenya, Somalia, Angola, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, swelling the ranks of the displaced and carrying with them their disorientation and sense of being-here-and-not-belonging. They were met with outbursts of xenophobia, which still flares up on occasion. Cape Town exists upon a fault line between alluring tourist haven and toxic repository of human despair, degradation and, yes, lingering discrimination which has not yet been rooted out.

*Dr. Ute Ben Yosef, former long-serving librarian of the Jacob Gitlin Library in Cape Town, has written and lectured extensively on aspects of Jewish art. Her book *The Graven Image: The Life and Work of Moses Kottler*, published by Perskor, appeared in 1989.*

Samuel Bak, survivor of the *Shoah*, has set himself the task of visualizing universal questions about the great human catastrophe on behalf of those who did not survive to do so. His message will resonate among all who have needed to rebuild their lives from broken shards. Born of the nightmare of helplessness, horror and dread, his visual images have an exceptional power to pose challenging questions. Their boldness has the capacity to produce a cathartic reaction of healing among those who view it.

Born during a most fateful year of European history – in 1933, Hitler ascended to power in Germany - Samuel Bak nevertheless enjoyed a happy childhood. He was sheltered in a cultured family, loved and spoiled by his grandparents on both sides and protected by his affectionate parents, Mitzia and Jonas. When he was five years old, whilst walking home with his mother, a street thug spat at him, calling him “Zjid- filthy kike”. He did not know what that meant. His parents decided to transfer him to a Jewish kindergarten and introduce him to the culture for which he had suffered such abuse. There, he became fluent in Yiddish. At an early stage, his precocious talent was evident, and was encouraged by his wonderfully gifted maternal uncle in Berlin, the musician, composer, conductor and expressionist painter Arno Nadel. There was never a doubt that he would become an artist.

Then, when Samuel was just eight years old, nightmare struck. The Germans occupied Vilna, the “Jerusalem of the North” known everywhere for its distinguished Yiddish culture, learned rabbis and scholars, abundance of libraries and archives and variety of religious academies. The trauma that unfolded within this special space and time would remain imprinted in his soul and become the template of his art. Bak remembers when Jews had to wear armbands, then yellow stars, and then being forbidden to use sidewalks. Finally, Vilna became engulfed in the forces of destruction. Jews were picked up from the streets and herded to the woods of Ponary outside the city, to be murdered in their thousands. Among them were both of his maternal grandparents, Shifra and Khone, and his paternal grandparents, Rachel and Chaim.

Samuel and his mother were placed in the Vilna Ghetto while his father was transferred to a forced labour camp. Because his mother's aunt Janina had converted to Catholicism and was in close contact with the nuns of the St Catherine Convent, they managed to escape from the ghetto and find shelter there. Later, Jonas managed to join them

and, together with Mitzia's sister, Yetta, and her husband they spent eight months in hiding protected by the Benedictine sisters - until the Nazis occupied the convent. They found an escape route above the ceilings and fled back to the ghetto. There, Samuel was befriended by the Yiddish writers Avraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski. They encouraged the nine year-old boy to participate in an art exhibition which was held in the ghetto. They also entrusted him with the Pinkas, the record book of the Jews of Vilna, which he filled with drawings of the life around him.

On 23 September 1943, the Vilna Ghetto was liquidated. Jonas was transferred by the SS to the HkP 526 forced labour camp and Samuel and Mitzia lived there with him, in the most terrible conditions and in constant fear. But at least they were together as a family. In this labour camp, an 'Aktion' took place during which 250 children were called out, lined up and shot. Samuel escaped once again by hiding under a bed, but heard the dreadful cries reverberating through the camp.

Samuel's parents worked out an escape plan. Mitzia fled, alone, to Aunt Janina and Jonas carried the ten-year-old Samuel out of the camp to his work place in a sack of sawdust. There, he dropped him out of a window and Samuel had to flee and not look back, into the arms of a very frightened rescuer, great-aunt Janina's maid. By sheer chance, luck, coincidence, and the resoluteness of his parents, Samuel and his mother survived the catastrophe: "How was I to understand the randomness that regulates human destinies, the game of chance that has granted me life?"¹

In Fig.1, Samuel Bak depicts himself as the child artist who has the duty to paint pictures commemorating what he has seen and experienced so that it will not be forgotten. With a dazed look, he emerges from the sack in which his father smuggled him to freedom. In his hand he holds a pencil. Behind him, the outlines of the Warsaw ghetto boy are discernible, with his hands held up as in a crucifixion. His figure is assembled like a collage, slightly withered, like a fading memory: "... The Presence of the Warsaw boy's figure in my art is for me an act of remembrance that safeguards our collective memory".²

The shoes in front of the Warsaw ghetto boy are reminiscent of the countless shoes assembled in Auschwitz. An empty canvas on the top left hand corner is waiting to be filled with images. In the words of the Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, the canvas indicates the role that art has to play "in the arduous labour of renewal."³ In the foreground are sheets of paper, on which testimonies are yet to be written. They are held down by pebble stones, customarily placed on Jewish graves. Next to them a sepulchral cavity appears in the ground filled with, perhaps, headstones. In the background, smoking chimneys appear over what in Bak's iconography represents an empty vessel of stone, and *shtetl* houses with rising smoke.

This self-portrait connects Bak with the Warsaw



*Fig.1. Self Portrait. 1946
Watercolor on Paper. 38.1x30,5cm
Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery*

Ghetto child and with him all the children that have perished. This includes his childhood friend and namesake, Samek Epstein. He thought much about the fact that he could have met with the same destiny as Samek, who had been discovered by the Nazis hiding in a cupboard and shot. Bak had to try and find a way to ease this burden and has found that by remembering he would give meaning to Samek's life: "It gives me comfort to think that in some way I can live today for the two of us and that his future wasn't totally obliterated, since by living in me he is still being remembered and he helps me to remember all of Them."⁴

At Janina's home, Samuel was reunited with his mother but they had to leave urgently because of the danger they brought to her. They did not know where to go. They stood on a bridge with the raging river Viliya below, Samuel clinging to his mother's coat, leaning against the handrail looking down on the water, carrying with it chunks of ice, branches and other debris. Suddenly Mitzia grabbed him and ran with him once again to the Benedictine Convent, where Sister Maria Mikulska, Father Stakaukas and Vladas Zemaitis hid them with a group of other Jews until the liberation of Vilna by the Red Army in mid-July 1945.

Their new life as dazed survivors began, first in Vilna, where they looked at the devastation and learned the terrible news that Jonas had not survived. A few days before liberation, he had been taken to the Ponary forest and machine-gunned to death, like his parents and parents-in-law before him.

Samuel and his mother then travelled to Poland, staying for a while in Lodz. From there, they went to Berlin in search of their uncle, Arno Nadel, but he and his wife had been murdered in Auschwitz. They now made their way south to the American zone, reaching the Landsberg Displaced Persons camp in Bavaria. Ironically, this was the same town in which Hitler had written *Mein Kampf*.

Their traumatic experiences were etched into their subconscious, while on the surface they tried to continue with a new life of adjustment. This is captured in Fig.2, in which Bak retrieves shadows of

reality and reflects upon the impossibility of memory to reconstruct what has existed.⁵ He said that this painting depicts his own family. However, the people he represented here in the form of a surreal frontal photograph, one of them the Warsaw Ghetto child, are Jews who perished and had become his family through their shared fate: “For me, being a painter means being possessed by a world of ghosts; and making the best of it...”⁶

These figures appear – less as people than as metaphors – their fragmented features and bodies built up in parts by prostheses and fragments. In the middle foreground we see a monumental egg, similar to a stone monument, riddled by bullet holes:⁷ “*The Family* sums up many of my artistic themes. The rear plan is a dark and smoke-laden sky... these afflicted people gather [to be included in] their huge family portrait and look at us inquiringly, asking to be remembered.”⁸



Fig. 2. *The Family* 1974
Oil on Canvas. 45x35.3cm
Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery

Early Artistic Training

Wherever they had sojourned after the liberation, Mitzia arranged for Samuel to have art classes. While still in Vilna he was trained under a specialist in stage design.⁹ Then he had a teacher who insisted on his drawing from classicistic statues¹⁰. In Lodz, he was taught by a Professor who tried to tear him away from the academic style.¹¹ Thus, he learned at an early stage of his artistic development that there is no such a thing as a unique style.¹² While they lived in the Landsberg DP camp, Mitzia enrolled him in Munich for lessons with a member of the Munich Art Academy, Prof Blocherer. On the days when he came to Munich by train, he visited the art galleries, the Alte Pinakothek (the old masters) and the Neue Pinakothek - (19th and early 20th Century art). He also saw an exhibition of modern art held in Munich by the Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris.

In the Landsberg DP camp, Samuel turned thirteen, the age to celebrate his barmitzvah. But now he took a stand which was to become the underlying theme in his art: “Since our God had broken [H]is promises, I didn't see why I should make any

commitment to [H]im”.¹³ On the other hand, he felt “an almost inescapable need to give testimony.”¹⁴

Until today, Samuel Bak feels the necessity to produce works of art every day of his life:¹⁵ “Like a Jew who visits a cemetery and leaves small stones on the graves of his beloved ones, I add painting upon painting as acts of remembrance.”¹⁶

In the Landsberg DP camp, Mitzia married Nathan Markovsky, fondly known as Markusha, who had survived the horrors of Dachau. He had lost his first daughter in the Kovno Ghetto and then his wife and second child. The three of them became a new family, supporting and sheltering each other from the trauma of the past.

In 1948, the family was brought with other refugees to Marseille, where they boarded the *Pan York* which brought them to Haifa. After the Israeli War of Independence, they settled in Tel Aviv. In 1952, Bak began studying at the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem and from 1953 to 1956 served in the Israeli Defence Force. Life in Israel was fraught with emotional challenges. Holocaust survivors at that time had the further trauma of being stigmatized for having “allowed themselves” to be “led like sheep to the slaughter”. Bak learned to speak and write Hebrew. He gradually absorbed the culture and the images of the new Jewish state of which he became a part.

In 1956 Bak, now a recognised member of the Israeli avant-garde participated in exhibitions and worked as stage designer for the Habimah and Ohel Theatres in Tel Aviv under the producer Peter Frey, creating costumes and stage décor. For this work, he won the first prize from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation which brought him to Paris - a yearning fulfilled. There he began studies at the École des Beaux-Arts¹⁷. Paris was still the world centre of modern art, exuding the spirit of the great Paris School, Picasso, Braque, the Surrealists, with new breakthroughs into abstract art which became his style during his early period. His abstract and semi-abstract paintings have a palpable intensity and radiate a powerful, brooding energy. Something is looming within the interaction of colour planes and forms, which was unrecognizable but expressing “that fear I wanted to touch with the paintings”.¹⁸

In 1959, Bak married Annalis. They had three daughters, Ilana, Daniela and Michal, who presently live in Paris. He has four grandsons, Rafael, Tom, Tufa and Noam. After a painful divorce, he married Joseé, who has become the sustenance of his life and his art.

The Pucker Gallery in Boston

Bak exhibited at various prestigious art galleries throughout Europe. When he began exhibiting in America, he developed a close relationship with the Pucker Gallery in Boston. This distinguished gallery, which not only exhibits works by prominent artists, but is actively involved in educational art programmes, is known as a centre for questioning and learning. Together with his wife Sue, Bernie

Pucker became Bak's close friend and, in his own words, a "major catalyst and sustainer" of his art.¹⁹ The Baks decided to move to Boston in order to be close to the Puckers, purchasing a house in Weston, Massachusetts. The Pucker gallery has exhibited Bak's canvases for over four decades in memorable exhibitions, each time under a specific theme. Each exhibition was accompanied by a scholarly publication. Bernie and Sue Pucker have generously donated these publications to the Jacob Gitlin Library and thus the art of Samuel Bak has become known in Cape Town's art circles.

At the 1959 Venice Biennale, Bak for the first time became acquainted with American Pop Art, a form of realism with an ironic twist. During the 1960s, his style evolved into a visual language based on the old Renaissance masters – which he turned into the language of the Jewish experience. His visual language is often compared to surrealism. But his paintings are not surrealistic, as they have nothing to do with fantasy. They are linked to a definite historical reality.

Description of selected paintings

There are no direct representations of the horror or mass death in the art of Samuel Bak. He works through symbolic substitutes. The viewer is invited to 'read' his visual texts, akin to literary interpretation. Langer has formulated a method of decoding Bak's visual language and the following paintings have been chosen as examples following his guideline.

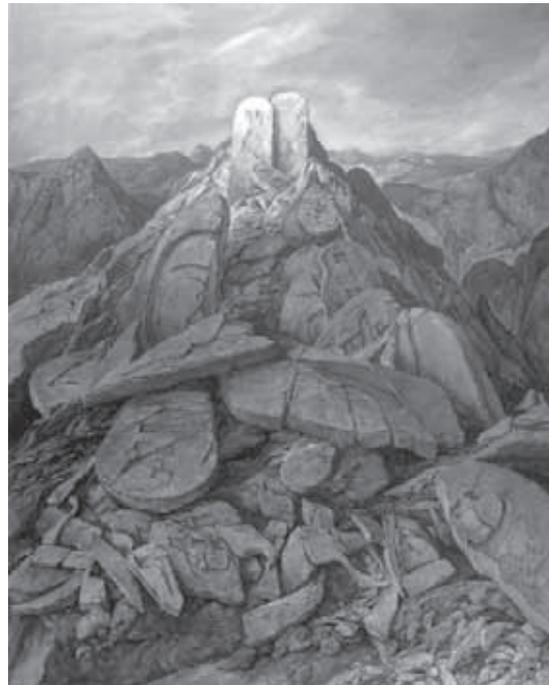
Fig.3: This painting is a monument to Samuel Bak's father. A cracked tombstone is fastened by a girth. Uprooted trees of the Ponary forest in which Jonas was murdered float in the air. Bak uprooted these trees in his paintings so that they should not grow on the masses of dead people, among them his father, and his four grandparents. 'Jonah' is the



*Fig. 3. Memento for Jonas II 2001
Oil on Canvas. 24x18”
Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery*

Hebrew for dove, hence the symbol of the dove on the memorial. In this painting, Bak eternalises his personal loss. The image is imprinted within the collective Jewish memory. But not only Jewish memory. Throughout the life of Samuel Bak these wounds were opened time and again with the occurrence of other human catastrophes: "Whenever on the television or in the papers, I see those heaps of anonymous bodies lying strewn in streets of Beirut, Kosovo, Africa or elsewhere, a howling sound resounds in my mind – the name Ponar".²⁰

Fig.3: In the light of an arid mountain within a vast landscape in a blue and purplish hue we see the tablets of the law, the two *yods* for God's name on the left tablet. They are otherwise bare and stand above a wreckage of numerous tablets strewn across the mountain slope. At the bottom of the two blank tablets lies a smaller one, bearing the Hebrew *aleph* and *bet*, of the first Commandments about the worship of God. The giant 6 is broken. It alludes to the 6th Commandment: "Thou shalt not murder" and at the same time to the Six Million. At the bottom of the hill broken letters of the "Shema Yisrael" (Hear, oh Israel) appear. The tablets of the Word of God have turned into tombstones: "How shall the cry of 'Shema Yisrael' be heard in this cold and barren atmosphere, lacking human presence or divine? Can memories besieged by catastrophe ignite the spark for a renewed covenant?"²¹



*Fig. 4
Shema Yisrael
Oil on Canvas. 200x160
Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery*

Fig.5: The foliage of an uprooted tree is depicted in the shape of Yellow Stars. Its trunk is severed from its roots, supported by three poles, one of which is fastened by a rope to a ruined brick wall. The trunk too has been ripped out, its roots having

grown long and thin, crawling around in search of soil. It rests in a container which looks like a suitcase, on a pillar or log, ready to be rolled away. The stump has a single living branch which may express hope. A strange pink light dominates the scene within an immense and barren landscape.



Fig. 5. **Destinies** 1995-1996
Oil on Canvas. 200x160
Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery

Fig.6: We see a ship built of stone, with the Star of David imprinted on its prow, of which some slabs reveal a ghetto building. The sea is calm. The ship contains houses, damaged or intact, and two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. They are bare – nothing is written on them. The chimneys are those of the death camps exuding smoke which is almost petrified. As Langer points out, Bak here visualized the poem by Nelly Sachs:

*O you chimneys,
O you fingers
And Israel's body as smoke in the air*²²

The commandments have disappeared from the tablets, the ship has been turned to stone, and the stones are reminiscent of the Western Wall, another symbol of destruction of the Jews in another era. And there is no departure because there is nobody to depart. The viewer is left with the dark uncertainty: where can the experience of the Holocaust lead to?

So this "Journey" is not a journey at all and the title is ironical. It is a scene of utter immobility in time and space, or in the words of Langer: a "journey into the cemetery of remembrance."²³

Fig.7: The motif of the broken key unable to open the lock is a metaphor for an insoluble question. Langer, in his analysis of this particular painting, quotes the last poems by Nelly Sachs, entitled:



Fig. 6. **Journey**. 1991
Oil on Canvas. 200x160
Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery

"glowing enigmas". One of the poems: "despair", is about the struggle of the poet as well as the painter to find verbal and visual metaphors with which the inheritance of loss can be overcome. It is about the struggle to find a language, or an image that describes the unimaginable.

This painting is part of a diptych (two panels). It reveals the difficulty of the transition from the horror of the past to the present. Here the key to the "hidden question" is broken. Its bit consists of two *Yods* (designating the name of God) gleaming in a light from an unknown source, beneath a vast sky with a dark cloud. Underneath a rubble of rocks are the outlines of a synagogue, also broken, its windows in the shape of the tablets. It is crushed by the ruins of a stone arch. The hidden question ("Where was God?") remains unanswered. A destroyed culture and its faith are separated from their divine origin. Samuel Bak sees himself as a painter of questions for which he does not know the answer.

Bak's stepfather, Nathan Markovsky, had tried to teach him to play chess. After his death, chess became a prominent motif in Bak's art in his honour and memory. Chess is a war game, a game of contest, a struggle, demanding careful planning to attack or retreat, in order to defeat one's opponent. For Bak, the game of chess is a symbol of the rational mind. But at the same time it represents the absurdity of war, and the failure to prevent it.²⁴

In Fig.8, chess figures are hiding in the slit or a battle trench on a huge chess board consisting of stone slabs whose surface has broken as if after an earthquake, or a battle. They are standing in the slit in which architectural archways forming catacomb-like structures are visible. On the right



Fig.7. The Hidden Question. (Part II). 1994
Oil on Canvas. 160x140cm
 Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery

we recognize a white queen and a black king. The rest of the group in this ditch are pawns and rooks.

The scene refers indirectly to Nathan. A man of sophistication and intellect, he gradually succumbed to dementia, the process of which – and his efforts to cover it up – was very humiliating for him. Thus the chess motif in Bak’s art, apart from being a metaphor of the Holocaust, is also very personal. It is about the disintegration of consciousness, of mental decline, of the state of incoherence which he experienced with his stepfather.

In a painting entitled **The Sounds of Silence** (1995) a quartet is depicted, playing – its music inaudibly. The bodies of the musicians are assembled by different materials – One is blindfolded with the uniform of the concentration camp, another wears a mask. They wear wooden wings nailed together in fragments which may mean that the sounds they create come with difficulty. They do not seem to interact as in an ensemble, but each one plays quietly by himself.



Fig. 8. Underground II. 1990/1997
Oil on canvas. 86,5x127 cm
 Image courtesy of Pucker Gallery

Langer, in his description of this painting, again quotes Nelly Sachs:

*We the rescued,
 From whose hollow bones death had begun
 To whittle his flutes
 And on whose sinews he had already
 Stroked his bow –
 Our bodies continue to lament
 With their mutilated music.²⁵*

At their feet lie the fragmented parchments of the Vilna Ghetto – and a damaged Torah scroll. In the same way in which these musicians create sounds in the midst of ruins, Samuel Bak creates his paintings. Art must triumph over the catastrophe and form a message to the living – even with great difficulty. To him art means “rebuilding from destruction”.²⁶

The Return to Vilna

In 2000, something that for Samuel Bak had seemed to be unthinkable took place. Invited by the Lithuanian historian Rimantas Stankevicius to return to Vilna, he accepted the invitation and, accompanied by Joseé, visited the places of his childhood. He saw the building of the new Jewish Museum of Vilna, for whose inauguration the director Emanuel Zingeris planned a retrospective exhibition of his works. For the opening of this on 24 September 2001, Bak travelled to Vilna for a second time, accompanied by Josée and his three daughters from Paris. Also joining him was Bernie Pucker, under whose auspices this stupendous exhibition took place. Pucker called this memorable trip to Vilna with Samuel Bak and his family “The essence of life and death”.²⁷ The Jewish Museum housed Samuel Bak’s early ghetto drawings and the Pinkas. The chief exhibition of over 100 paintings took place in the National Gallery of Vilnius. In 2002, he was in Vilna once more to speak at a ceremony in memory of those who had saved Jews in the Holocaust; a special honour was devoted to Sister Maria Mikulska, of blessed memory.

During these visits to Vilna more memories which had been frozen in oblivion were revived. Samuel Bak’s art assumed a new perspective. He saw his former home in Wilenska str 10, which had been turned into a centre of Lithuanian school projects for the teaching of the Holocaust. He went to the Ponary Forest. And he visited the places of his childhood trauma. On his return to Boston, Bak began painting with a new passion. His palette became brighter and the scenes are more personal, more emotional.

The still life **Hidden Tikkun** (1999) is a design of fragments in different perspectives and stages of disarray, with the Hebrew letters *Tikkun* (the *Khuf* half hidden). Tikkun means to heal the world. The serenity of the traditional still life is broken up and reassembled through a masterful composition. The shining surface of the broken pitcher displays a handle in the form of a question mark. The pear is a

most important symbol in the art of Samuel Bak. For him it means life because he regards it as the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The rickety table is seen from different perspectives. Samuel Bak's still lifes convey his most important message, namely that one can repair, but not restore a fractured civilization: "My still lifes are portraits of the families that have survived".²⁸

Samuel Bak paints a world of destruction, of broken parts and links this inextricably with the formal perfection of his style.²⁹ For Bak, Tikkun first of all unites people.³⁰

Further Reflections on the Art of Samuel Bak

Samuel Bak always remembered the words of his mother: "Distance yourself from emotions that hurt, do not succumb to self-pity; and above all, keep your pride intact"³¹ And yet he has to come to grips with the most devastating human experiences: "The profoundest experience in life is the experience of loss".³²

Bak's paintings are visual texts, which invite the viewer to decipher their content. He makes use of allegories, metaphors and the device of substitution. For example, in a painting entitled **Interruption** (2001), which belongs to the period after his return to Vilna, he depicts an abandoned teddy bear as a metaphor for the child whose toy it had been, and with that – for all the children whose lives had been interrupted so cruelly. In this artistic device of substitution, an inanimate object replaces a human reality. The teddy-bear, with his damaged body, speaks to us like a real child.

Another device of substitution are Samuel Bak's paintings of books as replacements for the Jewish people who have perished. Vilna housed the famous Strashun Library, a Judaica collection ranging from early holy texts to the latest secular books. As a child, Bak frequented this library and saturated himself amongst others, with the works of Yiddish authors. During the Nazi occupation some of the library's books were hidden by the Jews of Vilna, a large number was destroyed and some were looted by the Nazis for their bizarre plan for a museum of Jewish culture.

In his art Samuel Bak deconstructs the world of his own experience and that of the collective Jewish history which stretches from the story of Genesis to the chimneys of Auschwitz. He forges them into existential questions. But what is more, for him these paintings have assumed a life of their own, as independent entities: "My paintings know that they owe their existence to the miracle of my survival."³³

Bak thus places an obligation on the post-Holocaust viewer to work actively in the reversal of the destruction of the Shoah. His paintings are a bulwark against collective amnesia. To forget would be an act of further extinction: "... The Ruins of memory are now a permanent part of our human

heritage. Any effort to build a future while ignoring those ruins would compromise our allegiance to both decency and hope..."³⁴

NOTES

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- 3 Langer, Lawrence, Adam and Eve in the Art of Samuel Bak, Pucker Art Publications, Boston, Mass., 2012, p9.
- 4 Bak, 2001, p306.
- 5 Samuel Bak. Painter of Questions. (Film) 2003.
- 6 'Illuminations. The Art of Samuel Bak', Collection at "Facing History and Ourselves" with contributions by Adam and Margot Stern Strom, Samuel Bak, Lawrence Langer (Introduction and Commentaries), 2010.
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- 9 Dr Marcondic, in Samuel Bak, Painted in Words, p369.
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- 12 Case, Alvin (Director and Producer). Film recording: "Adam and Eve" and "Samuel Bak: Studio". Recent paintings by Samuel Bak. He interprets his works and speaks about himself. Florida Holocaust Museum, 2012.
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- 14 Samuel Bak. Lecture to the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Washington
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- 16 Samuel Bak. 2000, p435.
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- 19 'Samuel Bak. Painter of Questions', Film, 2003.
- 20 Samuel Bak, 2001, p248.
- 21 Langer, L.L., Landscapes of Jewish Experience: Paintings by Samuel Bak, Boston, Pucker Gallery, 1997, p75
- 22 Ibid, p6
- 23 Illuminations, 2010, p8.
- 24 Bak, quoted by Eva Atlan, Paintings of the last Decade, Aberbach. 1974.
- 25 Langer, 1997, p116.
- 26 Bernard Pucker in: Painter of Questions (Film), 2003.
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- 28 Ibid.
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- 30 Rob Cooper. Film Interview, 2001.
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- 32 Samuel Bak, in: Cooper 2001, op. cit.
- 33 Samuel Bak in Langer, 2007, p109.
- 34 Langer, Illuminations, 2010, p11.

THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

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Janus J Gluck

A short while before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, another historic find was unearthed in 1945 near the village of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt: a batch of 12 codices containing 53 tractates of ancient texts. They are copies of some early Christian literature, some or most of which were written in or around the second century C.E. At that time, Christians still regarded themselves as the true Jews, and the codices throw additional light on the spiritual ambience of that fateful period. Consequently, the Nag Hammadi documents should be of interest not only to historians of early Christianity but also to Jews, particularly those interested in the conservative Jewish reaction to the sect of Shaul of Tarshish - St Paul.

It was the newly converted Roman Emperor Constantine the Great who, in 325 CE, forbade Christians from praying in synagogues, thus severing all ties with parent Judaism. The schism was thenceforth officially acknowledged and enforced, initiating Christian antisemitism. That was some three centuries after the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, three turbulent centuries largely ignored by the traditional Jewish sources.

What had caused that social turmoil in the Roman Empire of the period that had made life so unbearable? What had made people so desperate for succour, for a god even, that offered a hope for something better to come, be it even from beyond the grave?

The main cause of misery was economics, the utter privation brought about by Roman greed and corruption. The Roman historian Tacitus,¹ no friend of the Jews and Orientals, mentioned that Syria and Judea were exhausted by the burden of taxation. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the late-First Century CE, recorded the extent of poverty and famine in Judea. He wrote, inter alia, that in years of drought, wars, plagues or calamities, the Jewish farmer had to paint the legs of one of his children white to be able to pay his taxes. (Those on the slave market had their legs painted white.)² Another Jewish-born chronicler of the period, Philo of Alexandria, noted that taxes were exacted with such severity that villagers abandoned their homes and ran for their lives at the approach of the taxmen.³

The main taxable items were agricultural products, but there were also land taxes, poll tax, water tax, road tax, salt tax, border tax and yet others, whatever the liberal tax system closed its eyes to. The Roman treasury demanded only 2½% from the value of taxable items, but its collection

was auctioned out and the highest bidder could add his commission. He, in turn, auctioned the collection to regional bidders, who auctioned it further until the last possible yield was wrung from the people. Nor were there higher authorities to which to appeal against this.

Josephus mentions a case from Gadara (a town on the border of the Golan), whose citizens sent a petition complaining against the Roman client king Herod to the Emperor Augustus during the latter's visit to Syria. After Augustus's refusal to see them, the members of the delegation sent were so afraid of Herod's revenge that instead of returning home, they chose to commit suicide.⁴

The Romans in their vainglory coined the historic assignation of *Pax Romana* (Roman peace). In reality, *Pax Romana* survived through cruelly corrupt administrations backed by cruelly efficient military power. The obscenely rich Roman officialdom loomed large over the hard-pressed masses, especially so in the provinces, where people existed in debased conditions of absolute hopelessness.

The various modes of local worships did little to alleviate the wholesale misery of life under Roman domination. Rome knew of the reputation and respected the invisible God of the Jews but ridiculed their dietary laws, regarded circumcision as barbaric and saw Jewish exclusiveness as xenophobic. But Judaism has had another inherent element, not generally appreciated, a prophetic certitude about the coming of the Messiah who was expected to redeem Israel, and through her mankind - not only in the spiritual sense, in Heaven, but in the real terms of life down on earth. That Messiah, according to prophetic teachings, was to be a scion of David and was to come from Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David. According to Josephus,⁵ 1st Century Judea was bustling with Messianic expectations, with a number of holy men being regarded as, or claiming to be, the Messiah. Nor were the claims about Davidic ancestry necessarily far-fetched. The Davidic families had many children in the course of the millennium since King David, and the descendants were certainly proud to remember their family history in good times and bad.

Prophets appear when prophets are expected. When Jesus of Nazareth appeared, Messianic hopes were at their highest and his followers certainly made the biggest impact on history.

The creation of myths around leaders and holy men is characteristic of religions, especially in their incipient stages, as is the spawning of endless gnostic speculations. This makes the reconsolidation of historical facts difficult, if not altogether impossible.

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The fifty-odd Nag Hammadi documents reveal an unsettled state in the early Church. There seems to have existed around that time a wealth of pious literature of diverse origin and nature, most of which was declared by the Church to be heretical and as such to be destroyed. Around the 4th Century C.E. there existed a monastery at Nag Hammadi, and modern scholars presume that the codices, buried in a sealed jar, originated from its library. Credit is due to that nameless librarian who disobeyed the directive of his superiors and hid the codices instead of destroying them.

The language of the Nag Hammadi texts is Coptic, a remnant of ancient Egyptian used by the Copts, a Christian community in Egypt a few million-strong. The original tongue of these scriptures is regarded by scholars to have all been Greek, though at least one of the texts states explicitly that it was written in Hebrew.

The context of most of the books is pious speculation, such as adding details to what is told about Christ in the New Testament, or evangelizing, sermonizing and lecturing. Their general character is gnostic, claiming esoteric knowledge in the realm of spirit. The one we have chosen to cite is a part of 'The Nature of the Rulers', an account of the Creation but with a difference.

This book, like many of the others, is written in an epistolary form. Our text, like most of the others, was translated by a foremost scholar of the codices, Professor Marvin Meyer. We, however, have introduced a few synonyms and changed a few particles to facilitate understanding for our readers. The bracketed words are our own additions. The three dots stand for lacunae in the text.

The Nature of the Rulers⁶

Concerning the nature of the authorities, the great apostle, through the spirit of the Father of Truth, referred to authorities of darkness and told us that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against authorities of the world and spirits of wickedness. I have sent you this writing because you have asked about the real nature of [such] authorities.

The leader of the authorities is blind. In his power, of ignorance and arrogance he said, 'I am God; there is no other but me.'

When he said this, he sinned against [the] Almighty. This boast rose up to an anger and a voice answered from the anger said "You are wrong Samael", which means "blind god"⁷ [the god of dark forces].

His thoughts were blind. He expressed his power – that is, the blasphemy he had uttered – and pursued it down to chaos and his mother the abyss, at the instigation of *pistis sophia*.⁸ She established each of his offspring according to its power, after the pattern of the eternal realms above. For the visible had originated from the invisible Angel looked down into the region of the waters. Her image appeared as a reflection in the waters and the authorities of darkness fell in love with her. But they could

not grasp the image that appeared to them in the waters, for they were weak, and what is only of soul cannot grasp what is of spirit. For the authorities were from below but the image of the angel was from above.

That is why the angel looked down into that region, so that, by the Father's will, she might bring all into union with the light.

The rulers [or 'the authorities'/'the gods'] made plans and said, "Come let us create a human of soil from the earth." They formed their creature as being entirely of the earth.

These archons have bodies that are both female and male and faces that are the faces of beasts. They took soil from the earth and formed their human after their own bodies and after the image of God that had appeared to them in the water.

They said, "... let's grasp the image by means of the form we have shaped, so that the image may see its male partner ... and we may seize it with the form we have shaped." They did not understand the power of god, because they are powerless.

He [Samael] blew into his face, and the human acquired a soul and stayed upon the ground for many days. The rulers could not make him arise, because they are powerless. Like storm winds they kept on blowing, that they might try to capture the image that appeared to them in the waters. And they did not know what power was.

All these things came to be by the will of the Father [the Almighty]

Later the spirit saw the person of soul upon the ground. The spirit came forth from the hard land. It descended and made its home within him, and that person became a living soul. And the spirit called his name Adam, since he was found moving around upon the ground.⁹

A voice came from the Incorruptible to help Adam. The rulers gathered all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the sky and brought them to Adam to see what Adam would call them, that he might give a name to each of the birds and all the animals.

The rulers took Adam and put him in the garden, that he might cultivate it and watch over it. They commanded him and said, "You may eat from [every] tree in the garden, but do not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Do not touch it, for the day you eat from it, you will surely die."

They [said] but they did not understand what [they said] to him. Rather, by the Father's will, they said this in such a way that Adam might eat, and Adam might perceive them as would a completely material person.

The rulers plotted together and said, "Come let's make a deep sleep fall upon Adam." So Adam slept. The deep sleep they made to fall upon him, and he slept, is ignorance. They cut open his side ... like a living woman. Then they repaired his side with flesh in place of her, and

Adam had only a soul.

The woman of spirit came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." When he saw her, he said, "You have given me life. You will be called the Mother of the living. For she is my mother/She is a birth-giver/a woman/one who has given birth."¹⁰

The gods approached their Adam. When they saw his female partner speaking with him, they became aroused and lusted after her. They said to each other, "Come, let's ejaculate our semen into her," and they chased her. But she laughed at them because of their foolishness. In their grasp she turned into a tree, and when she left for them a shadow of herself that looked like her, they defiled it sexually. They defiled the seal of her voice, and so they convicted themselves through the form they had shaped in their own image.

Then the female spiritual presence came in the shape of the serpent, the talker. The serpent taught Adam and Eve and said, "What did Samael [say to] you? Did he say, "You may eat from every tree in the garden, but do not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil"?"

The serpent, the talker, said, "You will not surely die, for he said this to you out of jealousy. Rather, your eyes will open and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil." And the female talker was taken away from the serpent and she abandoned it as something of the earth.

The woman of flesh took from the tree and ate, and she gave to her husband as well, and thus these beings, who had only a soul, ate. Their imperfection became apparent in their ignorance. They recognised that they were stripped of the spiritual, and they took fig leaves and tied them around their naked bodies.

The leader of the gods came and said, "Where are you Adam?" For he did not know what had happened.

Adam said, "I heard your voice and was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid."

The ruler said, "Why did you hide, unless it is because you ate from the only tree which I commanded you not to eat!"

Adam said, "The woman you gave me offered the fruit, and I ate." And the arrogant god cursed the woman.

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The gods turned to the serpent and cursed its shadow, [so that it was] powerless, and they did not know it was a form they themselves had shaped. From then on, the serpent was under the curse of the authorities. The curse was on the serpent until the perfect human was to come.

The gods turned to their Adam. They took him and cast him and his wife out of the garden. They have no blessing, for they are also under the curse.

The gods threw humanity into great confusion and a life of toil, so that their people might be

preoccupied with things of the world and not have time to be occupied with the holy spirit. After this Eve gave birth to Cain, their son and Cain farmed the land, then Adam had sex with his wife. She became pregnant again and gave birth to Abel, and Abel was a shepherd. Cain brought in produce from his field, and Abel brought in an offering from his lambs. God looked with favour upon the offering of Abel, but he did not accept the offerings of Cain. Cain, man of flesh, pursued Abel his brother. God said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain answered and said, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

God said to Cain, "Listen. The voice of your brother's blood is calling to me. You have sinned with your mouth, and it will come back to you. Whoever kills Cain will release seven vendettas, and you will live groaning and shaking upon the earth".

Adam [had sex] with his partner Eve again. She became pregnant and bore [Seth] for Adam. She said, "I have given birth to another person through God, in place [of Abel]".

Eve became pregnant again and gave birth of Norea. Eve said, "He has produced for me a virgin to help many human generations." Norea is the virgin whom the forces did not defile.

And humanity began to multiply and develop.

The confusion of personae and imageries is a hallmark of Gnostic literature. However, the aim of bringing the Nag Hammadi codices to Jewish attention has been historical and not to compare it to Jewish mysticism.

Our biblical story of the Creation, in this befuddled recounting by a Hellenized author and steeped in Greek mythology of major and minor gods, of divinities, angels, demons and spirits, was not accepted by the early Christian Church either. It is, however, revealing of the mystic, convoluted spiritual-intellectual milieu in which Jewish monotheism was slowly withdrawing and within which a nascent Christianity was being accommodated.

Notes

- 1 *Annals* (CE 17.) II 42:5
- 2 Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX, 51.2, et pas. *Wars* II, 85:6
- 3 *De Legibus* ... III 159-62.
- 4 *Antiquities*, XIV
- 5 *Antiquities* XX 162-5, 169-72, 188. *Wars* II 261-3.
- 6 Also called here below 'Authorities', 'spirits', 'gods' and others, with or without capitals.
- 7 Pure Aramaic and also in post-Biblical Hebrew.
- 8 Greek: 'Faith' and 'Wisdom'.
- 9 The author of this story was most likely a Hebrew, Phoenician or Syrian, for he knew that *adama* means ground. It does not mean that in either Coptic or Greek.
- 10 There may be a play on words here, like in the Hebrew חַוָּה (*chava*) not evident in the Modern Coptic.

CLARE SCHUR, THE FORGOTTEN JEWELLERY AND THE JOINT

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Gwynne Schrire

It is not every day that Cape Town's *Cape Jewish Chronicle* receives an e-mail from overseas asking for something that had appeared in one of its distant back issues. The item requested in this particular case, by Jeffrey Schur in New York, was a group photo from an article in the August 1989 issue.¹ One of the 24 tiny faces depicted sitting at a dinner in 1948 to celebrate the restoration of the Jewish Hospital in Budapest was that of Jeffrey's aunt, Clare Schur. The only other photo he had of her was in her 1946 passport.

As the *Chronicle* could not help, they asked me. I tracked down the original article and the life of a remarkable person was revealed.

In July 1989, the Cape Council of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies received a letter from New York from the offices of the Joint Distribution Committee, a worldwide relief organisation active in more than 70 countries. Unlike Jeffrey's 2013 e-mail, this letter, sent in April, had taken three months to arrive. The Joint Distribution Committee of (the American) Funds for Jewish War Sufferers - known as the JDC or simply as the 'Joint', was established in 1914 to help Jews effected by the First World War; through a network of social and community assistance programmes, it grew to become the largest non-political organisation dedicated to helping Jews in distress all over the world.²

Why had the Joint written to the Cape Board? During the closing down of its Geneva office earlier that year, jewellery belonging to Clare Schur, who had supposedly died twenty years earlier, had been discovered in a safe. Could the Board trace her heirs?

The Board did more. Through the Communal Register they found Clare, alive and well and living in Sea Point. *Chronicle* Editor Irma Chait went to visit her and a fascinating story emerged.³

Clara Rachel Schur was born in O'Kiep, Namaqualand, on 12 February 1910⁴. It was an adventurous enterprising family. Her grandfather, Moses Schur, was one of the first Jewish shopkeepers in Namaqualand, a sparsely populated semi-desert area, bitterly cold in winter, boiling

hot in summer, but rich in copper, with O'Kiep the headquarters of the Cape Copper Company. It was said that the first time Moses Schur appeared he was on foot with a pack on his back, the next time the pack was on a donkey, the third time he had a cart with two horses and on the fourth occasion opened a shop in the little village (now a ghost town⁵) of Bowesdorp, bringing out his sons Joseph, Woolf, and Harry from Chaviadan, Lithuania, to manage various stores throughout the district.⁶

Joseph, Clare's father, travelled around Namaqualand buying skins. During the South African War, he was fined £500 for trading with the Boers in Bowesdorp. (He said he would have been a fool not to do so; the Boers paid him, whereas the British only promised him compensation⁷). His father then opened a hotel in Bowesdorp, which Joseph ran with his wife, Jenny, who came from Memel (Klaipeda), Lithuania. It had nine bedrooms, two sitting rooms, a dining room, two kitchens, stabling for 36 horses, a bar and a private bar.⁸ Jenny would manage Joseph's shop in nearby Nababeep when he went off on trips into the country to buy skins to sell to the Cape Town wholesaler JW Jagger & Co.

When she finished school, Clare moved to Cape Town staying with her brother, Lionel, in Plumstead, finding work in the office of the African Market Agency at Cape Town's Early Morning Market. Later, she moved to Johannesburg to work at Century Radio & Tube Company, 22 Plein Street.

Clare had a strong social conscience, following the rise of Hitler with concern and his impact on the Jews with horror. She applied for a job with the United South African Jewish War Appeal⁹ in Johannesburg. This fundraising organisation had been established in 1941 by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and the SA Zionist Federation. It operated under the auspices of the Board and worked through the Joint. The SA Jewish War Appeal collected money from the Jewish community and sent large sums to transport refugees from the Balkans to Palestine, to assist Jewish refugees in Switzerland, Greece and Spain, to Jewish communities in Algiers, Tunis and Casablanca, to the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Palestine which sent parcels to Jews who had escaped into Russia and for relief in Palestine itself. Money was also sent to the Teheran child refugees, and while allowed, to Stockholm, to provide food parcels to prisoners in Bergen-Belsen and Birkenau.¹⁰ After the war, it sent money and parcels of food, clothing and

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medicine through the Joint to the refugees released from the concentration and extermination camps, and who were then living behind barbed wire in displaced persons (DP) camps. A Scandinavian shipping line transported clothing free, and took 20 000 garments, 3000 pairs of shoes and 1000 blankets to the Polish port of Gdynia.¹¹ To Hungary, South African Jews sent 1645 packages of jam, marmalade and raisins and to Italy, 4000 cases of food, 10 000 articles of clothing and 1000 pairs of shoes.

When the War ended, Clare volunteered to work with the Joint instead of doing so long distance from South Africa and began her new job at its European headquarters in Paris on 21 October, 1946.¹² The move for Clare from O’Kiep to Paris represented quite a culture shock, but she was to go much further.¹³

The Joint’s work went beyond merely transferring funds, jam and shoes to local Jewish relief organisations. It tried to restore self-sustainable Jewish life within those communities. Before the war, it helped Jews to emigrate from Europe and, when that was no longer possible, it sent funds, food parcels and medicines to communities and then into the ghettos, opening shelters and soup kitchens and subsidizing hospitals, child care centres, educational and cultural programmes, even in the Warsaw Ghetto.

With the war’s end, the needs had multiplied. By late 1945, there were 75 000 homeless penniless under-nourished Jewish Holocaust survivors crowded into hastily set up and inadequately provided DP camps throughout Germany, Austria, and Italy, often under the control of the American Army whose General Patton lacked sympathy and understanding and had placed the survivors alongside hostile non-Jewish Polish and German refugees.

The Joint then took over the care of the Jews who were placed in separate camps, where it distributed emergency aid and tried to restore to the traumatized remnant of once flourishing families and communities a sense of community and normalcy. They set up schools for children who had lost their childhood, provided clinics and hospitals with new medical facilities for the ill and injured and established synagogues with Torah scrolls and ritual articles, food for holy days, cultural activities and books.

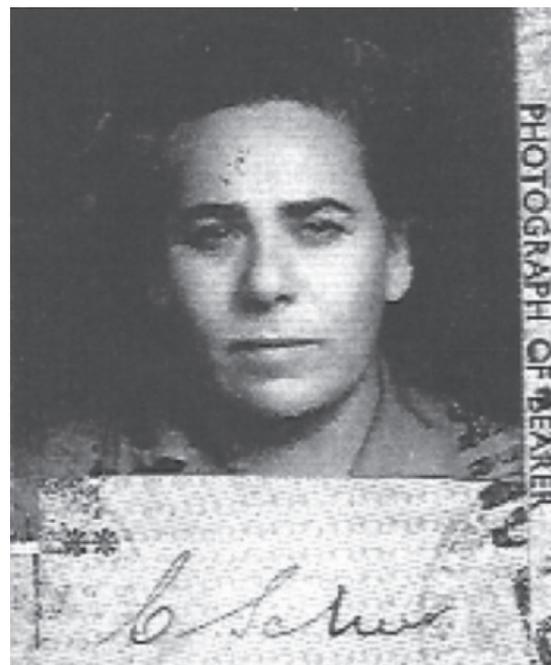
In Paris Clare, capable and efficient, threw herself heart and soul into this work. By 1947, the Joint was supporting 380 medical facilities across the continent, and 137 000 Jewish children were receiving some form of JDC aid.¹⁴ The Joint by then had developed a field organisation that covered Europe and later North Africa and had opened offices in all East European countries, except in the USSR.

At first, Clare enjoyed the experience of working in such a cosmopolitan culture-rich city but she wanted to do more than office work. The plight of the survivors in the camp touched her

deeply and she wished to be more hands-on in her involvement. She thus applied for a transfer from Paris and was sent to Prague as secretary to Israel Jacobson, director of the Czechoslovakian Division. Her administrative skills, dedication and passion for the work proved invaluable.

In the years 1945–1952, the Joint spent \$342 million on Holocaust victims.¹⁵ It had moved to a more proactive operational strategy with survivors who had remained or returned to their towns and villages, providing funding for the elderly and disabled, strengthening communal institutions and supporting cultural activities, including subsidizing Jewish theatres, books, and newspapers. The Joint sheltered Jewish orphans, supported state children’s homes and Jewish schools (with an enrolment of 20 000 pupils at the end of 1946) and encouraged religious activity.¹⁶

More controversially, the Joint was also financing legal - and illegal - Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe. The Jews wished to escape from the blood-soaked fields of Europe where they were not wanted. They wanted to leave the antisemitic populace and to go to Palestine, where they could live among their own people. The Joint started to move from emergency relief to long-term rehabilitation, and much of that involved helping the exodus to Palestine, soon to be the Jewish state of Israel. The aid included food, clothing, transportation, money for railroad tickets, and maintenance in transit camp. Of the \$30 million expended, \$10–\$12 million went to help Jews go to Palestine. This was problematic because Palestine was administered by Britain who, disregarding previous promises, was severely restricting the immigration of Europe’s Jewish refugees and blockading the ports. The Joint quietly helped finance the clandestine immigration conducted by the *Bricha* and *Aliyah Bet*.¹⁷



Clare started to travel widely. Within three years her passport, issued in Pretoria on 16 September 1946 to enable her to take up her job in Paris, was full. When Israel Jacobson was promoted to be the Joint's Hungarian Director in 1947, he arranged for her to be transferred with him to run his Budapest office. Clare was issued with a fresh passport in Hungary on 12 May 1949.

Adolf Eichmann had turned his attention to Hungary in 1944 and within a year his fanatical enthusiasm for exterminating Jews had reduced its Jewish population from 600 000 to 100 000. In 1946, an estimated 120 000 Jews in Hungary depended on the Joint for food and other basic needs.¹⁸ From then until 1952, the JDC allocated \$52 million for clothing, education, social welfare and food in Hungary (including jam, marmalade and raisins from South Africa). Some of the money was transferred in the form of bulk goods. Large quantities of coffee, bought in Brazil for dollars, were sold in Hungary for horints – at a huge profit. It was estimated that every cup of coffee made in Hungary was provided by the Joint.¹⁹ \$18 million went on cash relief and canteens, \$9.5 million on relief in kind, \$3 million on the aged, \$5 million on child care and \$5 million on religious and cultural life and education. Only \$645 000 was expended on emigration as Hungary would not allow its Jews to leave; a mere 2800 had grudgingly been allowed to emigrate by 1953.

In 1949, the Joint assisted 198 436 Jews to move to Israel and 19 404 to America.²⁰ Vocational training and *hachsharot* (agricultural training) centres were established for this purpose. Some indication of the reach of the Joint's work and the responsibility given to Clare can be shown in her second passport, which Jeffrey possesses, which contains dozens of European and Israeli stamps, showing that she must have travelled extensively inside Europe on business for the organisation. It is a pity that we cannot know what she was doing in those countries. She went to Austria, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Sweden and Switzerland, and she was also in and out of Paris – not bad for someone originally from Namaqualand.²¹

The Joint did not work in a vacuum and conditions in Hungary started to change. In June 1948, the Communists took over, this after even widespread election fraud had failed to hand them a parliamentary majority, and their leader, Mátyás Rákosi, assumed practically unlimited power. Opposition parties were declared illegal, and their leaders arrested or forced into exile. Catholic Cardinal József Mindszenty, who had opposed Nazism, Hungarian Fascism and communism, was arrested on charges of treason, conspiracy, and offences against the laws of the newly formed communist government. Rákosi's main rival, László Rajk, minister of foreign affairs at the time, was arrested, accused of spying for Western imperialist powers and executed.

Unfortunately for the Joint, their main offices were in America and it was to America that they reported and from whom they received most of their funds. The Joint kept the Government of the United States informed about its own operations and the conditions of the Jews in various lands.²² The Soviets, convinced of the veracity of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion forgery, suspected any international Jewish organisation of being a centre for espionage and assumed that the Joint was the front for an international spy ring. In Hungary, their letters were opened and their telephone calls monitored.

In 1949, Israel Jacobson visited the head office in America. When he returned to his post in Hungary, he was arrested as he crossed the border and taken to the prison where Cardinal Mindszenty was being held. The Communist government was looking for additional information to make the charges against Mindszenty stick. Jacobson was threatened with lynching and not allowed to wash, shower or move about. He was held under these conditions for twelve days before being released, charged with espionage and expelled.²³

After five weeks in prison undergoing torture and beatings with a rubber truncheon, Cardinal Mindszenty confessed to working with Americans against the State of Hungary. He also “confessed” amongst other things, to plotting to steal Hungary's crown jewels and to bring about a Third World War that America was to win and to personally assume power in Hungary. Shortly before his arrest, he had written a note stating that he had not been involved in any conspiracy, and that any confession he might make would be the result of duress. After a show trial which generated worldwide condemnation, including a United Nations resolution, he was given a life sentence for treason in 1949.²⁴ Pope Pius XI excommunicated everyone involved in the trial.²⁵

Although the Joint was not directly implicated - possibly because it was spending more money in Hungary than anywhere else besides Israel - it was scared to lose its foothold in Hungary and persuaded Jacobson to keep quiet about his experiences. With the Communist takeover, it was very difficult for Jews to get permission to emigrate and the Joint was desperate to be allowed to stay in the country to continue helping the Jewish remnant. Jacobson's silence therefore seemed a small price to pay.

Charles Jordan, who had represented the Joint in Hungary until May 1951 reported to their Paris office that the Hungarian government had neither “concern nor responsibility for the indigent Jews owing to the fact that they belong to the former bourgeoisies who have no claims on a People's State”. For the same reasons, most of those people were “ineligible for social benefits... And yet, oddly enough ... they and they alone of all the satellite countries at least let us help some of their people... they permit it to be known that money from ‘American Imperialists’ is permitted in to help their nationals.”²⁶ Jordan paid a heavier price than Jacobson. On a visit to Prague in August 1967,

by which time he was the JDC's executive vice-chairman, he was abducted and murdered.

In 1949, the Joint was expelled from Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria, in 1950 from Czechoslovakia, and in 1953 from Hungary. Many local Jewish figures who had worked with the JDC were arrested.

The Joint had been accused of espionage, sabotage, illegal currency transactions, speculation, and smuggling under the guise of charitable activity during the 1953 show trial of Rudolf Slánský, General Secretary of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, and 13 other Communists, 11 of them Jews, accused of participating in a Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy.²⁷ The trial was the result of a split within the Communist leadership, and was part of a Stalin-inspired purge both of 'disloyal' elements in the Communist parties, and of Jews from the leadership of Communist parties. (After torture the victims confessed to all crimes – eleven were executed and three sentenced to life imprisonment.²⁸) Also in 1953, during the Doctor's Plot in the USSR the Soviet press described the Joint as an international Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organisation set up by the American Intelligence Service which conducted broad-scale espionage, terroristic and other subversive activities and upon whose instructions the "doctor-saboteurs" allegedly acted.²⁹

When Israel Jacobson was arrested, he was succeeded as Clare's boss by Aaron Berkowitz, Jacobson's second in command. Clare became his secretary. Looking for information about his aunt, Jeffrey contacted Sherry Hyman, Director: Archives and Records of the JDC New York in 2001, who spoke to Berkowitz.³⁰ Although semi-paralysed from a stroke in 1999 and having trouble speaking, he made every effort to overcome these difficulties so as to tell Clare's story.

"All the Americans at that time in Budapest were under suspicion and were in danger of being arrested," he told Sherry. Aaron received confirmation from a Budapest government minister that Clare and all people associated with the Joint were being followed. The JDC executives then worked out an evacuation plan which they did not reveal to the rest of the staff. Clare was sent to Paris – against her will – and Aaron drove her to the airport, miserable and furious with him.³¹ For Clare had by then fallen in love with a Hungarian Jew, Stephan, and they had become engaged. Before she left, Stephan gave her his prized gold watch and gold chain and asked her to keep them for him, promising to join her soon. It was not until Aaron saw her later in Paris that he was able to reveal the reason for her transfer. He further told Sherry that Clare had been "truly appreciated in her Hungary post."

Rákosi now attempted to impose totalitarian rule on Hungary. The secret police persecuted all "class enemies" and "enemies of the people". An estimated 2000 people were executed, over 100 000 imprisoned and 44 000 ended up in forced-labour camps. Among the victims was Stephan.

He was caught trying to cross the border on his way to join Clare and imprisoned.

Aaron Berkowitz continued working with Clare at the Paris office of the Joint in Paris for another three years. Clare kept hoping that Stephan would manage to get out and messages from him arrived periodically through the Joint.

By 1955, the resettlements were pretty much completed. Clare decided to return to South Africa even though she disliked its politics. She had given up hope that Stephan would be able to join her. She settled in Cape Town, where her brother lived,

The next year, the Hungarian Revolution erupted. Students demonstrated in Budapest for reform and greater political freedom. In response Soviet tanks moved in and opened fire on protesters. The popular anger this aroused resulted in Imre Nagy and supporters taking control of the Hungarian Working People's Party and starting a new government. Cardinal József Mindszenty and other political prisoners were released.

Stephan managed to escape to Vienna, from where the Joint helped Hungarian Jews after the suppression of the 1956 uprising. He reached America and contacted Clare. She tried to join him but this was during the McCarthy era, the 'Red Scare' and the blacklisting of Communists. Because Clare had "worked in communist countries", she was denied an American visa. She turned to the Joint which has documents dating from February 1957 referring to her wish to join a fiancé (a Hungarian refugee or parolee) in the U.S. Sherry Hyman reported that "The parole and refugee regulations apparently prevented this at the time. Progress on attaining a reunion - either in the U.S. or South Africa - is not to be found in our files."³²

Stephan applied to join her in South Africa, but the latter regime was also strongly anti-Communist. Because Stephan was from Hungary, a Communist country, he was not allowed a visa either. Clare was devastated. She never married. What happened to Stephan's jewellery safely stored in the Geneva offices of the Joint for forty years remains a mystery.

Jeff Schur recalled her as appearing to be devoid of emotion although he remembered her spontaneously bursting into tears when she noticed someone on the Sea Point beach front with a concentration camp number tattooed on the arm.

"She never really explained the reason to me, a child of ten or eleven, but she did give me Lord Russell of Liverpool's book, *The Scourge of the Swastika*, when I was 13, which I didn't really appreciate until after I left South Africa and began very slowly accumulating our family history."³³

Jeff wrote that his aunt had devoted her life to helping other people, starting from her human rights sympathies from the time she left school to taking action during and after World War Two. This continued until she died. She had also worked for Colin Eglon, who represented Sea Point in the South African Parliament and became the leader of the Progressive Party.

I phoned Colin Eglin. He recalled Clare as one of a number of dedicated old ladies who worked as volunteers stuffing envelopes in the Progressive Party offices. He doubted if any photographs had been taken. A few days later, he phoned back. He had spoken to Errol Anstey, a Democratic Alliance City Councillor, who remembered attending Clare's funeral in 1993. Errol remembered, "I gave her lifts home from party meetings. I would organise township tours and she was one of the few people who would join them."³⁴ He searched and *voilà!* He unearthed two coloured photos of Clare in the tour group. Jeff was delighted. At last he had a photo of his father's sister.

Clare and his parents had been members of the Communist Party. His father had worked for Frank, Bernadt and Joffe who had defended Mandela with Bram Fisher and they had helped Adv. Harry Snitcher, a member of the SACP Central Committee, in his unsuccessful 1943 and 1948 attempts to be elected as a Member of Parliament. When the National Party came to power, life for them became difficult because of visits from the Bureau of State Security. Jeff left South Africa in 1969. Without any reason given, the Government even denied him a visa to return after his father died. He did not return until after Mandela was elected President, when he brought his daughter and two tiny grandchildren back to Cape Town for closure. But at least he now has his aunt's photo and the story of a remarkable woman has been restored to memory.

A few days later, I attended a consecration at the Jewish Cemetery in Cape Town. Cutting through the cemetery on the way to the ceremony having visited my parents' grave, I came up short because there, facing me, different from the other glossy stones, was a simple small rough hewn stone marking Clare Schur's grave.

NOTES

- 1 E-mail to Cape Jewish Chronicle dated 30.12.2012
- 2 American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Jewish_Joint_Distribution_Committee
- 3 Cape Town Jewish Chronicle, August 1989
- 4 Clare Schur Birth: 10 Feb 1910 Okiep, Namaqualand - Profiles and records.ancestry.com/Clare_Schur_records.ashx?pid=8648114
- 5 The town ran out of water so the whole town moved to nearby Kamieskroon and only ruins remain.
- 6 Phyllis Jowell & Adrienne Folb, Into Kokerboom Country: Namaqualand's Jewish Pioneers, Fernwood Press, Cape Town, 2004, p33
- 7 Ibid., p46
- 8 Ibid., p56
- 9 Its address on a metal cash box with a label in English and Yiddish in the collection of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies is given as PO Box 5991 Johannesburg, South Africa
- 10 Gwynne Robins [Schrire], 'The work of the Cape Board 1912-1948' in Robins, G (ed), South African Jewish Board of Deputies (Cape Council): A Century of Communal Challenges (SA Jewish Board of Deputies), 2004.

- 11 Green, P, 'South African Jewish responses to the Holocaust, 1941-1948', MA Thesis (Unisa 1987) pp. 51,158
- 12 Accounts Division sheet dated October 30, 1946, e.mail. Sherry Hyman, Director, Archives and records JACKY, 23.2.2001
- 13 It established its headquarters in Paris in 1933. Herbert Agar, The Saving Remnant: An Account of Jewish Survival since 1914, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1960, p34
- 14 YIVO Encyclopaedia American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee www.yivoencyclopedia.org/.../American_Jewish_Joint_Distribution_
- 15 Wikipedia as above
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 YIVO Encyclopaedia as above
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Agar, pp. 177, 186-187
- 20 Agar, The Saving Remnant, p221
- 21 This passport is in the possession of her nephew, Jeff Schur
- 22 Agar, p 176
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 József Mindszenty en.wikipedia.org/wiki/József_Mindszenty
- 25 Freed in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Mindszenty's liberty only lasted a few days because once the Soviet Union invaded Hungary he fled to the American Embassy in Budapest, was granted political asylum and lived in the U.S. embassy for 15 years. He was finally allowed to leave the country in 1971. He died in exile in 1975 in Vienna.
- 26 Agar, p178
- 27 YIVO Encyclopaedia as above
- 28 After Stalin's death in March 1953, the harshness of the persecutions slowly decreased, and the surviving victims quietly received amnesty one by one. In 1968 the Czechoslovakian President awarded medals to nine of the defendants – the honour came too late for the six executed recipients (Slánský trial, from Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia).
- 29 Agar, p179
- 30 E-mail from Jeffrey Schur, dated 25.1.2013
- 31 E-mail correspondence with Sherry Hyman, Director, Archives and records JDCNY, 23.2.2001
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 E-mail from Jeffrey Schur dated 25.1.2013
- 34 Personal communication, 8.1.2013

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“BREAD AND PEACOCKS” SARAH SHABAN’S COLLECTION OF EXOTIC RECIPES,

*

Veronica Belling

A cookbook bearing the most unusual name of *Bread and peacocks: a Cookery Book: Exotic Recipes*, by Sarah Shaban, described as “a prominent hostess in South Africa”, was published in London by Grosvenor Publishing Co. in 1969. It included a foreword by Cape Town teacher and journalist, Hilda Purwitsky.¹ A collection of exotic recipes, it is a fascinating and undeservedly neglected work, one that opens a window on the amazing ‘rags to riches’ story of Lithuanian immigrants, Sarah and her millionaire husband, former Yiddish journalist, Abel Shaban. Both were clearly great characters on the Johannesburg social scene from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Although *Bread and Peacocks* makes no claim to being a Jewish cookbook, its largest section is devoted to such Jewish staples as *pirogen*, *blintzes*, and *tsimmes*. On the other hand, the Fish section, that includes *gefilte* fish, also includes crayfish, and the Meat section, in addition to such favorites as *ptcha* (brawn), also incorporates recipes for ham. As the author was a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, who arrived in South Africa in 1925, this

book is very unusual. Fortunately, it is possible to acquire some insight into the nature of the author and the background to the book from her memoir of her home town of Pren in Lithuania, entitled *On Golden Corn*, published the following year by the same London publisher.

Sarah was the oldest of four daughters born to the Lieberman family in Pren, a small village not far from Kovno, surrounded by forests, fields, meadows and streams. She describes it as “small and enchanting with cobbled streets, whitewashed houses, with shingled and red-tiled roofs”.² In 1920 it is recorded that there were 935 Jews living in Pren, fractionally under 30% of the total population.³ Sarah describes her parents as tall and aristocratic of bearing with a taste for beautiful clothes and beautiful things. Her father was forced to give up his timber business during World War I, but even after he had lost all his money the family strove to maintain a certain lifestyle. From her mother, Sarah inherited a taste for the finer things in life that included beautiful clothing, gracious living and fine dining. She writes:

Our meals were a gourmet’s delight, for mother was an inventive cook. There was no food so humdrum that she could not make it look sumptuous. Her art lay in her flair for arrangement, in her play with colors and her ability to use nature’s bounty...Mother put all these ingredients to work, setting them off in the beautiful silverware, glass and crockery that better days had left her. Even sitting down to a rush meal on her own, she never omitted to set the table, to add a small vase with a single flower. She served as our finishing school. Mother taught us sewing, embroidery, housekeeping, knitting.⁴

Sarah describes her father as extremely religious and wrote that from early childhood she rebelled against the stringent demands of religion. This possibly helps to explain this very unusual and exotic cook book. Yet she writes that although she has few inhibitions about non-kosher food, she inherited her father’s loathing of pig, that he used to refer to as is the Yiddish custom, as *davar aher* (that different animal), yet recipes for ham are included in her cook book!⁵

Her memoir of Pren is replete with descriptions



Veronica Belling is the author of *Bibliography of South African Jewry (1997)*, *Yiddish Theatre in South Africa (2008)*, and the translator of *Leibl Feldman’s The Jews of Johannesburg (2007)* and *Yakov Azriel Davidson: His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913 (2009)*. She held the position of librarian at the *Jewish Studies Library, part of U.C.T. Libraries and the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research*, for over 30 years, retiring at the end of 2012.

of food. Dill and poppy seed grow in her backyard. Caraway can be picked in the fields. Mushrooms and berries abound in the woods. Cherry trees grow as large as oaks and the cherries themselves are as big as plums.⁶ She describes the different fish: *shtinka* – smelt fish - a tiny fish no longer than an English whitebait, that was cooked with saffron in a copper pot, *oklaikes*, a tender white-fleshed fish no larger than a pilchard, *zirten*, that her mother bought in a twenty five pound load and put into the oven to dry out and which was chewed like biltong. She also recalls *bob*, a broad bean that was usually cooked for Purim, served cold and salted. Other more typical foods that were perpetuated in South Africa are *cholent*, herrings, *lokshen* puddings, *kasha*, milk buns, *hamantashen*, *teiglach*. More unusual is porridge made with oats or rye with *gribenes* – fried poultry skin and fat, and a pie made out of calf lung, *rossel* - pickled beetroot, and mead made out of honey fermented with hops.⁷ She ecstatically describes the *Shabbes* meal, the finest meal of the week:

...golden chicken soup with fine noodles or *kreplach* (a Jewish ravioli) swimming in it. Then our knives would fall through stuffed fish, saffron colored in a pale yellow gravy; next, roast chicken with stuffed, braised chicken necks and chest-nut brown potato pudding, served with pickled apples or *tzimmes*, and finally a fruit compote and lemon tea.⁸

In 1925, as a young girl, Sarah immigrated to South Africa together with her sister, Ruth. They thus escaped the fate of their mother and two sisters, who perished in the Holocaust.⁹ Their father had already passed away. They were sent tickets by his brother, Sam, who had immigrated to South Africa some years before and who had prospered. Sarah writes that they were devastated when he sent them third class tickets. However, somehow her father managed to get together the £100 necessary to upgrade them.¹⁰

Between 1925 and 1928, the sisters lived with their uncle's family in Kroonstad, where they attended a convent school. In 1928, Sarah moved briefly to Jeppe and from there to Doornfontein, where she spent the next five years.¹¹ In Johannesburg in 1933, she married Abel Shaban, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania. He had been attracted by her striking good looks and long black hair with its distinctive grey streak on seeing her perform in a Yiddish play staged by the Zionist Socialist Party.¹² Abel Shaban, whose story is told to Amos Ben Shalom, in the book *Portrait of a Volksmensch* (published 1974), immigrated to South Africa from Krakinova, a small village in the district of Ponevezh in Lithuania. Far from any of the larger towns, it would seem that more Jews from Krakinova came to South Africa than from other villages. It was only thanks to the monetary support that was received from family and friends in South Africa that the remaining sixty Jewish

families in the small village were able to survive between the two World Wars,¹³ after which they were massacred by the Nazis.

Abel's father died in the First World War and with the exception of one brother who happened to be in South Africa at the time, the rest of his family perished in the Holocaust. With the traditional education in *kheyder*, *folkshul*, *yeshivah* and modern Hebrew gymnasium, Abel arrived in South Africa in May 1927,¹⁴ aged nineteen and with only two shillings and sixpence in his pocket. He spent the first six months living in a boarding house in Cape Town while he worked as a packer in the storeroom of CTC Bazaars¹⁵ and learnt English. He then received his first break when he was offered a job as the private secretary to Reuven Brainin, the Zionist leader and Hebraist, who had come to South Africa on a lecture tour on behalf of the Jewish Colonisation Fund together with his son, Joseph. This job launched Abel on a life in communal and social welfare work, in journalism and even in business.¹⁶

Abel worked as a journalist for sixteen years. He had begun writing for *Di Yidishe Shtime*, a Yiddish newspaper in Kovno in his native Lithuania at the age of just thirteen. In Johannesburg between 1930 and 1931, he co-edited the monthly journal, *Dorem Afrike*, forerunner of the later version of the same name that appeared continuously between 1948 and 1991.¹⁷ In 1934 he published a memoir, *Heymloze teg* (Homeless days) about the experiences of Jews during the First World War that was published in Warsaw.¹⁸ Between 1934 and 1939, he was also one of the editors of the weekly, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*,¹⁹ published in Johannesburg between 1931 and 1981. Before the outbreak of World War II in July 1939, he attempted to publish a Yiddish daily, the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Shtime* (South African Yiddish Voice), which only lasted for a few months.²⁰ During this period, he and Sarah lived in Judith's Paarl, from where they moved to Parktown for a year, and then to Emmarentia²¹ while supporting themselves by running a sweet shop.²²

In 1944, Shaban had another lucky break. An article of his predicting that the Germans would be defeated by the Russians had been published in the English monthly digest *Foreign Affairs*, the official organ of the Red Cross in South Africa. It caught the eye of that organisation's president, one Colonel Donaldson, a prominent financier who subsequently encouraged him to work on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.²³ After a few months of training, he had the good fortune of getting in on the ground floor of the new Orange Free State Gold development (Hartebeespoort and Buffelsfontein mines)²⁴ and by the age of forty was head of a chain of imposing companies.²⁵ In 1945 he was described as President of the Alpha Group, worth twenty million pounds sterling, with enterprises that included gold and diamond mines, copper and zinc, oilfields, forests, buses, aeroplanes, with shares on the Stock Exchanges of Johannesburg, London and Amsterdam.

Towards the end of 1948, only four years after the commencement of his business career, Shaban sold out his interests in the Alpha Group, and while still very young, retired from business altogether to devote his life to communal and social welfare work. His particular charities were ORT, the international Jewish vocational and technical training organisation affiliated to the International Labour Organisation, OZE, the international Jewish Health Organisation affiliated to the World Health Organisation, of which he was World President, and HIAS – the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.²⁶ He also served on the Executive of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies.²⁷ At the same time he maintained a suite of offices and a limited staff to look after his family's and his own private interests.²⁸

The Shabans had three sons, of whom one died as a baby of eighteen months and a second was tragically killed in a motor accident at the age of eighteen. In 1974, their eldest son was married with two sons, and practising as a lawyer in Johannesburg.²⁹

With his meteoric rise from rags to riches, Shaban and his wife acquired a stately mansion that had been built for the legendary mining magnate, Barney Barnato, in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.³⁰ They renamed it 'Prenova', a fusion of the names of their home *shtetls* of Pren and Krakinova. The mansion was situated on three acres on the Houghton Ridge with a view over Johannesburg. They installed a private swimming pool and converted the original stables and out houses into garages, a two storey building to house the servants, and a cinema where family and friends were able to view films in private. The house itself was a two storey building with twenty two rooms each beautifully and tastefully furnished in its own style, with furniture imported from France, England and Holland, including Persian carpets, antiques and priceless paintings.³¹

The Shabans became well known for hosting the elite of Johannesburg Jewish society as well as visiting dignitaries at huge banquets that gave Sarah the opportunity to demonstrate her considerable culinary talents. According to Hilda Purwitsky, who wrote the preface to her cookbook, "Guests who have eaten at her table remember her offerings no less for their delicious taste than for their eye-appeal and the pleasing harmony with which delicacies have been assembled into a poetic structure."³²

Thus when Yiddish travel journalist, Henry Shoshkes, visited Johannesburg in 1948, it was only natural that he should be hosted by the Shabans at their mansion; the welcoming banquet was attended by no less than Chief Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues, Louis Rabinowitz, Member of Parliament, Morris Kentridge and Louis Pincus, head of the Poale Zion, and future Chief of the Jewish Agency in Israel, not to mention the "three giants of the Jewish Press", Leon Feldberg of the *S. A. Jewish Times*, Chaim Gershater of *The*

Zionist Record and Boris Gershman of the Yiddish weekly, *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*. Other guests included J. S. Judelowitz, characterized as "a walking encyclopedia, a secular free thinker, yet who never fails each day to read a page of *Gemara*", Reform Rabbi Dr Moses Weiler and Leopold Berger, wealthy Johannesburg magnate. Guests from Israel included Mr Hilman, Chairman of the Tel Aviv Industrial Association, Revisionist leader, Y. Shofman and Johannesburg based Histadruth leader, Alexander Levin. Shoshkes describes the Shaban home in these terms:

On Friday nights, after a week of hard work, the Shaban's home sparkled with lights and flowed with wine, and I could relax and muse about this extraordinary metamorphosis from the humble beginnings in Krakinova, Lithuania to this palatial mansion, "Prenova" in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. On clear sunny days, the view from the terraces of the white house, stretched as far as the eye could see, even to the Voortrekker Monument near Pretoria. Shaban's study had a strong Jewish ambience – dominated as it was by an original Marc Chagall – the Jew carrying a large heavy Sefer Torah on his back... Next to Chagall, is an oil painting of the shul of Vilna Gaon. Around this is a collection of religious artifacts, spice boxes, Sabbath candlesticks, kiddush cups from all periods and styles. In the massive entrance hall that could accommodate several hundred people, was a display of exquisite Sevres and Dresden porcelain, once owned by the French Empress Eugenia, and emblazoned with Napoleon's crest, the Eagle and Crown. Opposite stand two colossal seventeenth century Dresden vases, decorated with the sword and crown emblem of the Polish king Sigismund Auguste.³³

The house was distinguished by this mixture of antiques, Jewish religious artifacts as well as paintings by Jewish artists. Besides Chagall, they had paintings by the French Jewish artist Mane Katz. Most imposing was his mural, 'Mother Rachel Bemoans Her Children'. Writes Shoshkes: "so much concentrated pain and agony and protest of all Jewish mothers, such as no artist has yet managed to capture! The mural was so large that even in the spacious rooms of the Shabans it looked cramped."³⁴

Shoshkes also describes a grand banquet set in their sumptuous gardens with long tables that are "groaning with the abundance of Africa's earth". The guests were served by no fewer than a dozen black waiters, amongst who was one who seemed "more at home in Lithuanian Yiddish than in Oxford English". At this banquet, Sarah was accompanied by her friend, patron of the arts, the Dutch Jewess, Roza van Gelderen, who assisted her in the furnishing of her luxurious home. It was Roza's great friend, Hilda Purwitsky, who wrote the preface to Sarah's cook book where she expostulates:

Cooks like poets, are born, not made. And while

anyone with intelligence, taste, a discriminating palate and a sense of fitness can learn how to cook, the really creative and inventive *cuisiniers* are able at all times to go right outside the limits of the text book and produce dishes which are poems in their own right...³⁵

Sarah Shaban kept her methods and her recipes a strictly guarded secret and would never allow anyone to come into her kitchen to watch. It was thus fortuitous that she decided to publish a cookbook to share her skill and experience with others.³⁶ The scope of the book is wide – there are over 750 recipes - yet it is essentially the personal collection of a gifted and original cook. It is by way of being a culinary autobiography that takes the author from her home town of Pren in Lithuania to South Africa. Besides a preponderance of Litvak favorites, there is also a section of South African specialties that include *bobotie*, tomato *bredie*, *melkert* and *koeksusters*. The book represents a unique blending of cultures, Lithuanian and South African, at a time when Lithuanian dishes were still very much alive in the kitchens of South African Jews. However, recipes range from the exotic splendor of roast peacock, a bird not generally considered to be kosher according to Jewish law, to the ‘sustaining realism of home baked bread’.

The recipes are accompanied by color illustrations photographed in the author’s home. The photographs glow with the shine of copper, brass and silver vessels, that remind one of the Old Country. The cover is adorned with a color photograph of a large copper bowl overflowing with red cherries. Another photograph has a brass samovar and silver candle sticks, surrounded by plates stacked with pomegranates, chestnuts, and a

chocolate cake, adjacent to a plate of roast chicken with a dish of *latkes* (potato fritters) alongside. Copper, specifically reminds Sarah of her home as she reminisces in the introduction to the chapter on ‘Fish dishes’:

With the Nemen running along our doorstep, and the green-banked ponds and lakes nearby, and the joyous tradition of my mother behind me, I speak of fish with a certain holiness. It would be unthinkable for me to entertain without fish on the menu. There can be no formal dinner without fish. I have other convictions about fish. One of these is that it cooks better in copper, not only does it not burn, but it has the taste of ‘home’.³⁷

By far the longest chapter in the book, “Cheese Dishes, *Pirogen*, Dumplings and Other Dishes”, is dedicated to a wide range of Jewish favorites and including many little known dishes taken from the Lithuanian cuisine. Shaban confesses to being a great lover of cheeses that are generally accompanied by wine. However for those who don’t drink wine she provides her own recipe for punch, made out of orange juice, canned fruit juices, ginger ale and champagne. The recipes for cheesecake start with ‘Russian *Pashka*’ that is usually served at the Russian Easter. Other Lithuanian favorites are ‘*Shaltenosses*’, described as ‘one of the national dishes of Lithuania’. It is made out of noodle dough cut into two inch squares, filled with a mixture of cream cheese, egg yolks, cinnamon and sugar, and boiled then baked. *Pirogen* are filled with a variety of fillings such as cheese, salmon, chicken, *kasha*, liver carrot, mushroom, onion, buckwheat and potato. This section also has eight different recipes for the traditional *kugel* (pudding) with *lokshen* and



potato but also with cherries or plum puree; five varieties of *tsimmes*, and four varieties of *latkes*.

The chapter on Soups contains all the typical Lithuanian Jewish favorites: four variations of sorrel soup, three types of beetroot soup and four cabbage soups as well as a section on *rossel*, pickled beetroot. To add a personal touch she has included 'My Mother's Spring soup' made from baby carrots, green beans, turnips, potatoes, cauliflower and asparagus added to clear chicken soup. Then there are the soup garnishes, *mandelach*, *kreplach*, and *kneidlach* (matzo balls) with *neshomes*, literally souls – usually made from *gribenis* (chicken skins fried with onions) but also with almonds. Sarah reminisces,

Mother never made *kneidlach* without 'neshomes' (souls)...a filling placed in the centre of the dough of the dumpling. A little extra and different flavor to come upon unexpectedly. As children we always demanded what 'that thing' was in the centre. Father called it a 'soul' and without a soul he explained, drawing the parallel to the human being, the body is incomplete. The thought has remained with me ever since. I never make a *kneidlach* without a soul.³⁸

Even the recipes for familiar dishes contain unexpected variations, such as almonds and saffron in *gefilte* fish, trout stuffed with apples and walnuts, and stump nose fish cooked with mangoes. There are many original and unusual creations, such as 'Bloody Mary soup' made with tomato juice blended with sour cream and doused with a tumbler of vodka, curried chicken served in coconuts and a pyramid of sheep's tongues.

Unlike mammals, the Torah does not specify signs to differentiate between kosher and non-kosher birds although Mishnah (*Rema Yoreh Deah* 82: 3) mentions four. Despite the fact that early sources including Rashi seem to indicate that the peacock is kosher, as it is unclear whether it is the same bird, it is therefore prohibited.³⁹ Notwithstanding, the most dramatic recipe in Sarah Shaban's book is that of the peacock, that is roasted, stuffed with herbs, then dressed in its own feathers and a crown placed on its head, as described below:

When the bird is roasted, place on silver platter in sitting position. Dress tail with its feathers and the top of the head with a crest of little feathers and place on it a little golden crown. Paint the beak and the claws of the bird gold. Surround it with little bunches of red and green grapes, ripe persimmons, pomegranate halves and black figs. Trim whole arrangement with small grape leaves...

A pair would look magnificent.⁴⁰

However even more than for her lavish banquets, Sarah Shaban is remembered for her

collection of Jewish ceremonial objects that she acquired in the course of her travels around the world. The collection was housed in one of her beautifully furnished rooms, darkened by heavy velvet curtains, and contained in cabinets that were themselves collectors' items. Some of the items, such as a *Channukiah* from Poland, candlesticks from Breslauer, an alms box from Kiev, and an old wedding ring from Venice, were over three hundred years old. There was a three-tiered matzo plate from Egypt, another from Spain, an *Eliyahu Ha-Navi* (Elijah the Prophet) cup from Nuremberg and a *Ner Tamid* (Eternal Light) from Hungary. All these objects reminded one that in the poverty stricken world of the European *shtetl* there was a wealthy Jewish middle class who spent lavishly on objects that they valued. Other items were distinguished by their historical associations, such as the *parochet* (ark curtain) saved from the destruction of *Kristallnacht* in Germany.⁴¹

Sarah also served as Chairman of the Jewish Museum in Johannesburg, to which she donated many valuable objects as well as fittings.⁴² In 1974, she agreed to allow the public in to view her private museum and tours were conducted at the Shaban mansion under the auspices of Women's organisations.⁴³ In 1978, shortly after they relinquished their stately home, the couple presented a collection of *shtetl* paintings to the Harry and Friedel Abt Museum in the SAJBD's then Sheffield House premises in central Johannesburg.⁴⁴ Abel Shaban died in 1978, aged seventy. Sarah moved to an apartment in Hyde Park in Johannesburg⁴⁵ and lived on another twenty years. She died in 1998.⁴⁶

- The author wishes to thank Andrew Lamprecht, Senior Lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, for drawing her attention to Sarah Shaban's cookbook, and encouraging her to write it up.

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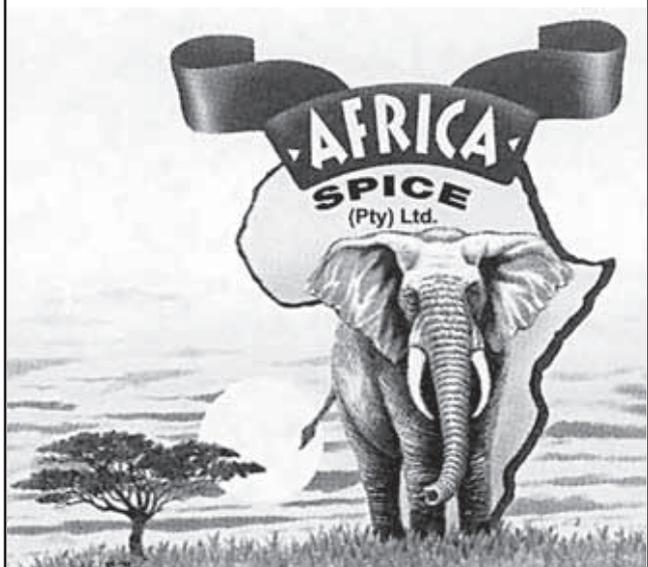
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DAVID FRAM: LITHUANIAN YIDDISH POET OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Hazel Frankel

The Yiddish poems of Lithuanian immigrant David Fram offer significant insights into Lithuanian-South African literature of a particular Jewish immigrant's diasporic experience. Joseph Sherman, well-known South African critic and Yiddishist, affirmed Fram's importance, recognising him as "the eminent South African Yiddish poet", whose "knowledge of and sensitivity to the Yiddish language are everywhere apparent, from his distinguished verse to his illuminating conversation".¹ Solomon commented that Fram was "South Africa's finest Yiddish poet ... who began in 1923 with idyllic poems of Jewish life in Lithuania".² For author and critic Mona Berman, he was the "poet laureate of Africa".³ While the golden years of Yiddish are long gone, my hope is that my own research and translations will make a significant contribution to our understanding of this important writer.

David Fram was born in Ponevezh, Lithuania, in 1903. Together with many other Jewish families who lived in the Pale of Settlement⁴ at the start of World War I, his family was relocated to Samara, White Russia. Fram received a traditional Jewish *cheder* education and also studied with private tutors. He matriculated at a Russian Soviet workers' school in 1921 and then attended the military academy in Ukmerge,⁵ in order to avoid conscription. There he boarded with Yudel Mark, a linguist and educator who became his tutor and mentor. In 1926, Fram spent three months in Toulouse at an agricultural college. He returned home before leaving Lithuania in 1927 to join an uncle in South Africa. His education and devotion to learning gave him the wherewithal to become a writer despite the vicissitudes of migration. He died in Johannesburg in 1988.

Fram's Yiddish publishing debut occurred in 1923 when poems appeared in the *Kveytn* ('Blossoms'), Ponevezh, *Yidische shtime* ('Yiddish Voice') and *Folksblat* ('People's Paper'), Kovno, and *Literarische bleter* and *Oyfkum* ('Arrival'), New York. In South Africa, his poems were published in *Dorem Afrike*, *Yidische tribune*, *Foroys* ('Forward') and *Ekspres*, Johannesburg, and the *Fri-steyter*

baginen ('Free State Dawn'), Bloemfontein. His *Lider unpoemes* ('Songs and Poems', 1931) was the first "published lyric collection by a recognised poet based in part on South African experiences".⁶ The collection was Fram's first step towards fulfilling his aim to "make South Africa a Yiddish literary centre".⁷ It was followed by *A shvalb oyfn dakh* ('A Swallow on the Roof', 1983).

Various themes can be identified in Fram's oeuvre, reflecting his longing for and memories of his home in Lithuania and his life in exile in the Diaspora as wandering Jew and perennial outsider. He developed a personal lexicon of imagery in landscape poems that include his responses to the local inhabitants and describe the relationship between nature and the Creator. In addition, Fram's Holocaust poetry, by preserving the memory of his lost family and community, serve as testimony and bear witness; his poems were often personal.

Traditionalism

Fram's commitment was to traditionalism. Like many writers after World War II who were determined to revive the language and its literature, he perpetuated his heritage by continuing to use Yiddish, the language of the historical and personal past, despite the pressures of acculturation and assimilation. By leaving Lithuania when he did, Fram disconnected himself from the upsurge in Yiddish literary creativity and the Modernist thrust of the *Yung Vilne* and *Di khalyastre* groups. Once in Johannesburg, he became a member of the local group *Unicorn*, which included such South African writers such as Uys Krige and Vincent Swart. However, it would be true to say that Fram was never a part of any literary movement with a specific agenda, either international or South African, and so he may be considered rather as an individualist, a group of one.⁸

Thus Fram's poetry owed much to and was enriched by his traditional background. The poem *Fun tate-mames yidische* ('From Jewish Parents', *Lider 77*, 1939) was written thirteen years after he left his birthplace and is dedicated to "*Di kinderlekh fun der ershter yidisher folksshul in Yohanesburg, geheylikt*" ('Dedicated to the children of the first Yiddish Folk School in Johannesburg'). In it he reflects on the importance of culture, language and tradition for the community for future generations

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and regrets its dissipation.

The first quatrain describes the parents as being ashamed or embarrassed by Yiddish and their alienation from *yidishkeyt*.⁹ The poet maintains an opposite stance to those Jewish immigrants who had become estranged from the old ways, “*Fun tate-mames yidishe, vos hobn zikh geshemt / Mit yidish un fun yidishkeyt geven azoy farfremdt*” / “From Jewish parents who were embarrassed / By Yiddish and were so estranged from *yidishkeyt*” (1-2). Notwithstanding their negative attitude, the poet delights in finding that a “*fayer heyliker*” / “holy flame” (4) continues burning for the next generation as children sing in Yiddish and enjoy the traditional dances. The use of traditional rhythm and language emphasise the overriding theme, the importance of maintaining Jewish values. In that the poem’s form, regular metre and rhythm follow those of the conventional folk ballad, they also affirm traditionalism:

*Ir hot in yidish poshetn tsezungen ayer freyd,
Zikh gloybike, tsefridene in karahod gedreyt,
Un s’hot geklungen kishefdik der kindisher gezang,
Nokh vos ikh hob an elnter gebenkt vi ir fun lang....*

You sang out your joy in simple Yiddish,
And faithfully in contentment twirled the circle dance,
And the childlike singing rang out enchantingly,
For which I like you had forlornly longed for ages....

(5-8)

As emphasised in “*Az s’tsaplt zikh a heylikeyt bay yedern in brust*” / “That a holiness quivers in each and every breast” (10), the children’s innocent enjoyment echoes the poet’s own longing for *yidishkeyt*: “*Nokh vos ikh hob an elnter gebenkt vi ir fun lang*” / “For which I like you have forlornly longed for ages” (8), and it emerges “*oyf lipelekh bakheynt*” / “on charming little lips” (11). Though deprived by their parents, “*Pionern hobn oysgeleygt far aykh a heln veg*” / “Pioneers have set out a bright path for you” (13), and the poet shares the children’s pleasure, “*Dan hot mayn simkhe oyfgebroyzt mit ayerer tsu glaykh*” / “Then my joy welled up together with yours” (15) and so “*Az voyl iz mir, o kinderlekh, tsu freyen zikh mit aykh!*” / “How happy I am, oh children, to rejoice along with you!” (16).

In Fram’s poem, the children’s songs give hope to the adults that the language and culture will continue. While the poem focuses on past traditions, Fram explores and expands the possibilities of poetry, breaking new ground by locating his Yiddish poems in a new locale, South Africa.

Home and Diaspora

For pre-Revolution Russian Jewry, their home was the Pale of Settlement. After Czar Alexander II’s assassination in 1882, and again after the Revolution and World War I, thousands of Jews left this homeland. Escaping persecution, they followed family and friends in the hope of better economic opportunities elsewhere. Fram was part of this chain of immigration to South Africa, which became known as the golden country, *di goldene medine*. However, like so many other immigrants, Fram continued to refer to Eastern Europe as home, *di heyim* and many of his poems draw on a “rich store of memories of place ... evok[ing] in some small measure the familiar environment of the old country”.¹⁰ When he wrote of home, he referred to his birthplace, Lithuania, which persisted as his muse long after he left his *shtetl*, and Melekh Ravitsh commented on how Fram describes “the old home in beautiful pictures because the young sentimental Fram found it difficult to part with his home, with his *Lite*”.¹¹ The memory of Lithuania shaped his literary identity, affirming his recollections of home and family, intimacy and belonging, comfort, security and identity, all of which he lost when he left.

In ‘*Mayn opfor*’ (‘My Departure’, *Lider* 14), the poet’s close relationship with his family and his separation from it are embodied in the image of “*Dos hemd*” / “The shirt” (1), sewn for him by his devoted sister. The stitching itself provides a metaphor for their unbreakable bond, “*Derken ikh ire kleyne shtekh, di forzikhtike net. / Zi hot mit shtiler hartsikeyt un benkshaft es baveyt / In lange, lange ovntn farzesn zikh biz shpet*” / “I know her tiny stitches, the careful seams. / She breathed her quiet sincerity and longing into it / While sitting alone for long, long evenings until late” (2-4). This constancy of the shirt’s stitches contrasts with the rending of the fabric of his family on his departure.

The second verse of the poem describes how his mother caringly organised delicacies for his journey, “*Un nokh dem hot mayn mame shtil a pekele gemakht, / Dort pomerantsn ongeleygt un tsukerlekh farpakt*” / “And after that my mother quietly made a parcel / Packed with oranges and sweets” (5-6). He remembers her in intimate detail, “*aza kleyninke in harbstikn farnakht / Fardayget mikh aroysbagleyt tsum breyt-tseleygtn trakt*” / “such a tiny woman in the autumn evening, / As she worriedly escorted me to the stretched-out, broad road” (7-8). On the other hand, his father kept silence as “*A shkie hot a blutike in hartsn zikh tsebrent*” / “A bloody sunset burned in [our] hearts” (11). Stanza three emphasises the destruction and loneliness that occurred after the separation, “*Un kh’hob in nakht in harbstiker farlozn zey aley, / Tseshnitn hot mayn shtume harts a trukn-sharfer vey*” / “And in the autumn night I left them alone, / A dry, sharp pain cut through my silent heart” (13-14). This loss is emphasised in stanza four, “*in vayter Afrike, iz veytogdik un shver, / Durkh*

benkenish gelayterter farvoglt in der fremd" / "in far off Africa, it is painful and hard / Wandering in a strange land filled with pure longing" (21-22). The poem concludes with the painful memory, "*Mayn shvester hot mikh oysgeputst mit shmekedikn hemd, / Un mame hot aroysbagleyt in veg mikh mit ir trer*" / "My sister dressed me up in a nice-smelling shirt, / And mother's tear accompanied me along the way" (19-20). The shirt is the one tangible remnant of a time before "*s'hot a nakht a finstere unz alemen tsesheydt*" / "a dark night separated us all" (12).

The poem '*Mayn mame hot mir tsugesht a kishn*' ('My Mother Sent Me off a Cushion', *Lider* 18) also describes his mother's tenderness, in this instance demonstrated with a gift she sends him after he left her. This both reminds him of his home, "*A grus a heymisher fun benkendiker Lite!*" / "A home-made greeting from yearning Lithuania!" (2), and also highlights the harshness of his new circumstances, "*Do in Afrike, in enger kaferite.*"¹² / *Oy, ven zi volt epes fun dem visn!*" / "Here in Africa, in the crowded concession store. / Oy, if she only had an inkling about it!" (3-4). Clearly her dreams for him have not materialised; instead "*hakhnoedik, tsufridn un farlitn, / Kafers muz ikh shmutsike badinen*" / "servile, content and patient, / I must serve dirty black customers" (7-8). Nevertheless, the poet feels a degree of closeness to the local customers, realising that they are "*Glaxh vi oreme un leyndike brider*" / "Just like poor and suffering brothers" (10). Like them, after long hours of work, he feels "*farshvigenen un mider*" / "more silent and tired" (11), and is counting the length of time of his suffering, "*Tseyl ikh ovntn tsuzamen shoyn in yorn*" / "I have already counted my nights in years" (12).

In the final verse, the image of petals "*fun gertener gerisn*" / "torn from the gardens" (14), contrasts with that of feathers in verse one tenderly "*gekhovet*" / "gathered" (16) by the poet's mother to fill the cushion. Like the flowers, he too felt torn away. The purity of white feathers also contrasts with his subsequent dirty working conditions. Finally, the poem reinforces the memory of his mother's generosity and the beauty of his homeland, "*Mayn mame hot mir tsugesht a kishn / Durkh vayse vintern di federn gekhovet*" / "My mother sent me off a cushion / The feathers gathered during white winters" (15-16).

In both '*Mayn opfor*' and '*Mayn mame hot mir tsugesht a kishn*', a concrete object embodies the loss of the old home and advances the narrative. The poems themselves become containers like the cushion, of memories of home, of his mother's feelings for him and his for her, of his loss of his family. Far from the hub of Yiddishism, Fram's yearning for Lithuania and his adaptation to his new circumstances are thus embedded in his choice of imagery, highlighting the immigrant conflict between moving forward and looking back, between possibility and loss, between the acquiring of new languages and adapting to different cultural

mores, and the diasporic longing to preserve the old customs, between the sense of belonging and feeling outcast.

Exile

Place plays an important role in Fram's poetic subject matter, and his writing may be located within a diasporic-exilic dialogue. The poem '*Ikh benk*' ('I Yearn', *Lider* 89) was written soon after Fram's arrival in South Africa, when the pain of parting was still in the forefront of his memory. In it he describes the fields, forest and village he left behind, the people and animals going about their labours and the gathering of the crops. The repetition of the title as the first line of each verse emphasises his feelings of loss, "*Ikh benk azoy mid nokh a shtikele shvartse, tsekvolene erd / Nokh harbstike regns oyf felder un blotes oyf endlozn trakt*" / "I long so tiredly for a piece of black, swollen earth / For autumn rains on the fields and for mud on the endless road" (1-2), and "*Ikh benk nokh di yidn fun velder, vi kuperne yodles farpekht, / Vos shmekn in friike reykhes fun shvomen un varemekn mokh*" / "I long for the Jews of the forests, pitch-dark like copper firs, / Smelling of the early scents of mushrooms and warm moss" (5-6). The poem evokes memories of the dark Lithuanian soil and the autumn gloom as the horses trudge through dense mud towards the *shtetl*, "*Un zun kumt tsu geyn oyf a vayl vi a zeltener khoshever gast*" / "And the sun visits awhile, like a rare, honoured guest" (12), and their associated emotions, the heaviness of "*dorfishn umet*" / "village sadness" (4), and the exhaustion after the weekday toil so that they would "*shlep'n aheym zikh oyf shabes*" / "drag themselves home for Sabbath" (7). Looking back, the poet remains aware of the beauty and abundance as "*gibn di seder avek zeyer gob*" / "orchards give up their bounty" (9) and "*kelers farfult mit a vayniker gilderner last*" / "cellars are filled with their wine-like golden store" (10).

The poet misses the familiar way of life despite the endless mud, the difficulties of "*mide, tseveykte, farshpetikte, elnte ferd*" / "tired, soaked, late and forlorn horses" (3), the "*poyscher pratse*" / "peasant toil" (4), the "*shverer farmaterter vokh*" / "heavy, exhausting week" (8), and the "*groyer, farshvigenen velt*" / "grey, silent world" (16). He remains filled with nostalgia, "*In teg fun farlozn di seder ikh benk azoy elntik-shtum, / Nokh yidn fun pekhike velder oyf soflozn, blotikn trakt*" / "Now, when I have lost those orchards, I long, alone and silent, / For Jews of the pitch of the forest and the endless, muddy ways" (19-20).

Similarly, in '*Oyf mayn dakh hot amol gesvitshert a shvalb*' ('Once a Swallow Still Twittered on my Roof', *Shvalb* 67), Fram's memories of home are still idyllic. The central image of the '*shvalb*', the swallow, awakens a sense of possibility and hope, the kitchen filled with the aroma of "*tsufridenem broyt*" / "satisfying bread" (2), the "*farshikerter bez*" / "intoxicated

lilac" (9), the "*tishn gegreyt mit ladishes un kez*" / "tables bedecked with jugs and cheese" (11), the abundance of "*Fule donitses milkh*" / "Full milk pails" (14) and "*es tunkt zikh in gold dos farakerte feld*" / "the ploughed fields were dipped in gold" (15). Remembering the pasture filled with "*tsheredes shof*" / "flocks of sheep" (17), the poet is seized by "*gliklekher shlof*" / "contented sleep" (19). Thus, while the swallow is still on the roof, the poet remains connected to his home. This is ironic in that, by the time this poem was written, Lithuania as Fram had known it no longer existed, its population wiped out and its *shtetlach* decimated. Emigration saved Fram's life and he never returned to Lithuania, but its memory plays itself out in the poems written long after he had left.

However, as Fram began to "notice Africa, Africa began to dominate his poems ... [and] he was inspired and determined to go along that path".¹³ In so doing, he then became what Melech Ravitsh called the "progenitor of the Yiddish lyric in a new centre, South Africa", his poems filled "like an African pineapple with juicy Lithuanian Yiddish speech; his Yiddish language as rich as a pomegranate". Ultimately, Fram's poems incorporate "two worlds ... the world he brought with him and the new, wild and beautiful African world around him",¹⁴ embracing the paradoxes of old and new, Lithuania and South Africa, often idealising both.

Landscape and its inhabitants

Fram was culturally alienated in a South African society divided by colour. Safely white, the Jewish poet empathised with the black victims of the system, his narrative poems steeped in the politics, language and customs of the local inhabitants. In addition, images of flowers and fruit, bright sun, stark African sky, mine dumps and ochre *veld* recur and develop into a personal iconography, fulfilling his aim to enrich Yiddish "with an entire continent".¹⁵

The poem *In an Afrikaner baginen* ('In an African Dawn', *Lider* 74) opens on a joyful note with the sun as its central image, "*S'iz zunik un s'iz loyter der frimorgn*" / "It's a sunny and clear early morning" (1), heightened by the line "*Ekh, vos hele, shtralndike zun!*" / "Oh, what a bright, radiant sun!" (2), and "*A shmir, a shot, a glants fun toyznt zunen!*" / "A smudge, an outpouring, a radiance of a thousand suns!" (27). Aural descriptions enhance the lyricism of Fram's poems, for example "*A klung, a shprung, a tants oyf feste gruntn*" / "A ring, a jump, a dance on firm ground" (23). This use of short and springing rhythm endorses the high spirits in the lines, "*aroysshrayen mit ale dayne glider*" / "shout out with all your limbs" (39) and "*zikh aleytn mit eygenem geshrey fartoybn!*" / "deafens with one's own cry!" (46). There are also other sounds, "*Kvoktshet ergets-vu a leygedike hun*" / "A laying hen clucks somewhere" (4), "*A fokh, a patsheray, un fligl shotndike veyen*" / "A flap, a

beating, shadowy wings fanning the air" (6) and in the alliteration in "*Trikenen zikh shtil oyf grine lonke-lipn*" / "Dry up quietly on green meadow-lips" (17), where "*shpreyt zikh oyset vayt a nign*" / "melody spreads far and wide" (12).

Nature's richness also manifests in tactile images, "*Fun tsarte flaterlekh, fun babelekh, fun flign*" / "From soft butterflies, from beetles, from flies" (11), as well as nature's aroma "*stoygn shmekedikn hey*" / "fragrant haystacks" (13) and those which refer to the sense of taste, "*Oy, s'iz gut! S'iz zunik-hel. S'shmekt in vayse epel!*" / "Oh, it's good! It's sunnily bright. It tastes of white apples" (19), together with "*bloyn himl-shayn*" / "blue heaven-splendour" (45). The bright sunshine, the cluck of the hen, the white doves, the wind blowing and the songs spreading widely amidst the smell of the sweet hay, the green grass, and the yawning fields all hold nature's promise, so that "*s'kvelt a hele freyd in tsapldike brustn*" / "bright joy and delight well up in quivering breasts" (31). Repeated references to fruit and vegetables affirm the land's fertility, in "*s'gist zikh on der vayn in grine troybn*" / "wine pours from green grapes" (7), as the "*royte kavones in feld dergeyen*" / "red watermelons ripen across the field" (8), and this is also emphasised in "*korn baykhikn*" / "ripe rye" (15), and "*kupes hey, oyf shmekedikn felder*" / "heaps of hay, over sweet smelling fields" (48), and at the same time, "*shiker iz di luft fun tsaytkdikn peyres*" / "the air is drunk with ripening fruits" (9).

Fram introduced South African words, images, language and local customs into his poetry, adapting Yiddish to the diasporic environment. Thus, in *Oyf Transvaler erd* ('On Transvaal Earth', *Lider* 263), local plant names are transcribed in English,¹⁶ for example, "watermelon" (36), "cactus" (64), "peaches" (76), "dahlias," "hibiscus" (88), "eucalyptus" (93), "Christmas flowers" and "poinsettias" (140). Although he knew no English or Afrikaans, had never seen a black man before and had no knowledge of the different tribes, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and Shangaan, the inclusion of the words "*sakebona*" (hullo, 108), "*Zulus*" (114), "*krals*"¹⁷ (mud huts, 91), and "*matchekes*" (blankets used as clothing, 104), and the Afrikaans words, "*burishe*" (like farmers, 5), "*kafer!*" (black child, 54), "*kaferkral*" (tribal hut, 55) and "*pikanin*" (black child, 56),¹⁸ make the poems site specific, heightening their atmosphere in a process of adaptation and fusion.

Nature and Prayer

Several of Fram's poems connect natural phenomena with the presence of a greater Being, for example the lines in *In an Afrikaner baginen*, "*A lid, a brumeray, a shire farn boyre!*" / "A poem, a hum, a song of praise for the Creator!" (10), as well as "*Fun regn un fun toy batrifte tfiles*" / "From rain and from dew spattered prayers" (16). Through "*A shire, a geveyn, a loybezang dem boyre*" / "A song of praise, a lament, a hymn for

the Creator” (32), nature herself seems to “*Frum mispalel zayn un davenen un bentshn*” / “Pray piously and worship and bless” (37-38).

In *Ikh benk*, nature’s bounty induces reverence in the poet, so that “*Dan gloyb ikh ... dan gloyb ikh mit hertser, vos gloybn emunedik-frum, / Vos zaynen mit heylike tfiles vi harbstike kelters gepakt*” / “Then I believe ... then I believe together with hearts that believe faithfully and piously, / Packed like autumn cellars with holy prayers” (17-18). The poet also makes specific reference to *Shabes* in “*Vos shlepn aheym zikh oyf shabes durkh osyendik-vintike nekht, / Un garn nokh ruiker shalve fun shverer, farmaterter vokh*” / “Who drag themselves home for Sabbath through windy autumn nights / Craving tranquillity from the heavy, exhausting week” (7-8), focusing on how, “*Tsevaxst dan in vareme hertser a groyser, derbarmiker Got, / Un shpreyt aza mekhtikn gloybn oyf groyer, farshvigener velt*” / “And growing then in warm hearts a great, merciful God, / Spreads a mighty belief on a grey, silent world” (15-16).

The Countryside and its People

Fram’s poems *Tsu di shvartse* (‘To the Black Man’, *Lider* 19), *Fun shop tsu shop* (‘From Shop to Shop’, 1984), *Matumba* (*Shvalb* 85-88) and *Matatulu* (*Shvalb* 89-92) describe the experiences of rural black men in a hostile, urban environment. The poems indicate Fram’s “liberal inclinations” and his “strong belief in human equality and brotherhood”.¹⁹ (46), and the lines “*Hot keyn moyre an antloyft nisht fun mir, shvartse*” / “Do not be afraid and do not run away from me, black man” (1) and “*S’klemt a vey oykh vi bay aykh bay mir in hartsn*” / “There is a choking pain in my heart as there is in yours” (3) indicate his desire for friendship. The poet empathises with the futility of the black man’s wanderings, his hunger and loneliness, as he describes his exotic physical difference and sculpted strength, “*Ayer Brust azoy geshmidt, vi fun tshugon?*” / “Your breast was smelted, so like cast iron?” (12). The poet hopes to befriend him, but recognises the other’s hesitation, “*Nisht dershrekt zikh far dem bleykh fun mayn gezikht*” / “Do not be afraid of the paleness of my face” (2). Despite their physical differences, the two are alike as “*ven emetser zol ayer layb tseshnaydn – / Oykh fun shvartser hoyt a rizl ton vet blut!*” / “if someone were to cut your body – / Also from black skin blood would trickle!” (19-20). In addition, they have a similar moral outlook: “*Un oykh ir farshteyt, vos shlekht iz un vos gut*” / “And you too understand, what bad is and what good” (18), and there is kinship between them, “*Ikh farshtey aykh, un ikh trog mit aykh tsuzamen / Ayer freyd un ayer shvaygndike payn*” / “I understand you, and I carry with me like you / Your happiness and your silent pain” (5-6). Given his affinity for the black underdog, the term “*shvartse*” is here used descriptively, perhaps even affectionately.

Similarly *Fun shop tsu shop*, set in the Transvaal,²⁰ describes the struggle of the protagonist to find work, mirroring the poet’s own difficulties as a *smous*²¹ when he first arrived in Africa:

*Azoy a gantsn tog – fun shop tsu shop –
Iz er arumgegangen betlendik a dzhob²² –
A shtikl arbet zol men im vu gebn.
Er iz geven yung un kreftik vi an ayzn
Un dafke hot zikh im gevolt nokh lebn.*

A whole day like this, from shop to shop –
He went round begging for a job –
Hoping someone should give him a bit of work
somewhere.
He was young and strong as iron
And yes, he still wanted to live.

(1-5)

The black man’s arduous efforts prove fruitless in the face of the shop-owners’ indifference, “*Derlangt men mernit shtil a shokl mitn kop: / ‘Neyn, nito keyn arbet do, farshteyst? – Neyn!’ ... / Un vider veys er vayter shoynt nit vu tsu geyn.*” / “Giving him nothing more than a quiet shake of the head: – / ‘No, there is no work here, understand? – No!’ ... / And once again he does not know where to turn” (17-19). The poem thus sets up the socio-political hierarchy, “*Er hot azoy fil gute, vayse mentshn shoynt gezen / Un keyner hot zikh iber im a hungerikn nit derbarmt / Mashmoes, keyner darf nit hobn do zayn pratse un zayn shveys.*” / “He has already seen many good, white people / And no one yet has taken pity on him in his hunger, / Presumably, no one here needs his labour and his sweat” (21-23).

The man’s hunger is palpable in “*s’triknt im di shpayekhths azh fun hunger in zayn moyl?*” / “the saliva dries in his mouth from hunger?” (30), and so he “*benkt farkhalesht nokh a bisl proste ‘mili-pap’*” / “starving longs for a bit of simple *mielie pap*” (33). As he imagines how he would “*shepn shporevdik mit alemen fun heysn blekh / Dos aynkaykln in zayne shvartse hent s’zol vern shvarts vi pekh / Un nokhdem leygn dos mit groys hanoie in zayn moyl*” / “scoop up carefully from a hot tin with everyone / Rolling it in his black hands so it becomes as black as pitch / And then putting it in his mouth with great pleasure” (37-39), the reader’s mouth waters in sympathy.

Two long poems *Matumba* and *Matatulu*,²³ appeared in *Dorem Afrike* in 1953. Both tales of black men, they reflect the political disjuncture of the times when the black population had curtailed rights, circumstances similar to those of the Jews of Lithuania. Both poems idealise country life, illustrate the ills of urbanisation, show empathy towards ordinary peasant folk similar to Fram’s grandfather and elevate them to heroic status. *Matumba* and *Matatulu*, forced to leave their *kraals* in search of work in the city for white employers, lose their homes, family and traditional way of life.

The heroes' naiveté and sense of alienation there, the cultural clash between traditional customs such as *lobola*²⁴ and polygamy and the white man's pass laws²⁵ and monogamy, ultimately contribute to misunderstanding and tragedy.

Holocaust Poems and Memory

Fram's Holocaust poems provide a valuable aesthetic space for recording history, for bearing witness and giving testimony and for prayer. Thus, the imagery of the poem *Unzere kedoyshim* ('Our Martyrs', 1969) records the historical persecution of the Jews, specifically during the Holocaust. The central image is of rending a garment as a sign of mourning. By metaphorically tearing his own garment, the poet connects himself directly to the victims, the community tragedy also becoming a personal one, "*Nokh aykh, ir brider mayne, hob ikh haynt gerisn krie*" / "For you, my brothers, I have rent my garment today" (1) when "*s'volt farbay a frume, shtralndike eyde / Fun yidn gloybike tsu Gots gebentshtn heykhl.*" / "a pious, radiant congregation of faithful Jews / Were passing by [on their way] towards God's holy temple" (6-8), that is, to their death.

An entfder der velt ('An Answer to the World', 1971), refers to the yellow star that the Jews were obliged to wear and to the way they were exterminated: "*Ikh fil, ikh trog oyf zikh tsurik di gele late. / Fun vaytn knoylt zikh nokh fun kalkhoyvn der roykh*" / "I feel, I wear the yellow star once again. / In the distance there still billows the smoke from the lime-kiln" (1-2). Again associating himself with the victims, the poet drives home the horror of the time when "*Ven laykhtste shtrafgevezn iz: – farbren im, / Dos iz der psak – dem henkers shvartser kol*" / "When the lightest penalty was: 'burn him,' / That is the judgment – the hangman's black voice" (11-12).

*Dos letste kapitl*²⁶ expresses the poet's personal anger towards the perpetrators:

*Di hent dayne zaynen mit blut haynt bagosn,
Dos blut vest shoyn keynmol fun zeynit farvashn,
Es hot zikh in dir dayn bizoyen farloshn
Un s'zaynen farfoylt itst mit mord dayne gasn.*

Your hands today are drenched with blood,
That blood you will never be able to wash away,
Your shame became extinguished within you
And your streets are rotten now with murder.

(1984, 58-62)

Fram's poems record a lost place and people in a shattered world, evoking the impact of the Shoah on himself and his family and the depth of personal wounds.

Fram addresses Lithuania affectionately in *Dos letste kapitl* as '*Mayn Lite, mayn heymland*' ('My Lithuania, my homeland', 51). He recalls a time when the land was "*bagosn mit flamen / Fun gilderner hits un fun gilderner shefe / Un breyt hot*

di erd ire orems tseefnt" / "flooded with flames / Of golden heat and gilded abundance / And then the earth spread her arms wide" (4-6). The use of personification intensifies the country's abundance as she embraces her Jewish children, "*Azoy vi a mame*" / "like a mother" (7). However, the pastures then become killing fields as the mother turns murderess and the love-song becomes a dirge,

*Mayn Lite, mayn heymland, vi ken ikh dos gloybn,
Az du host di yidn bay zikh dort geshokhtn,
Du host zey dervorgn,
Mit dayne farblutikte negl atsinder,
Du host zey dershtikt – dayne eygene kinder!*

My Lithuania, my homeland, how can I believe it,

That you slaughtered the Jews there in your midst,

You strangled them,

Now with your bloody fingers,

You choked them – your own children!

(51-55)

Ultimately, all that is left are the "*meysim, harugim un kupes mit beyner*" / "murdered, the dead and piles of bones" (49), and "*A yomer fun kreyen vos pikn di beyner*" / "A lamentation of crows that pick the bones" (47). The poet himself then wants to take "*Nekome far alte farpaynikte zeydes, / Far gantse fartilikte yidishe eydes*" / "Revenge for old tortured grandfathers, / For entire annihilated Jewish communities" (85-86), and he considers his weapon:

*Nor ven kh'volt itst kenen a meser a sharf ton,
A sharf ton a meser azoy vi a britve,
Volt ikh dayne merder, mayn yidishe Litve,
Di gorgls tseshnitn mit heyser nekome.*

But if I could now sharpen a knife,

Sharpen a knife like a razor,

I would cut the throats of your murderers,

My Jewish Lithuania, in burning revenge.

(78-81)

The poem also bears witness for the annihilated men and women, grandmothers and grandfathers, brides, grooms and children unable to testify for themselves,

*Oy vey iz mir, Lite – ot zaynen, ot lign –
Azoy fil harugim: – mayn khaver, mayn bester,
Mayn shokhn, mayn korev, mayn eynstike shvester.*

Oh woe is me, Lithuania – here they are, here lie –

So many slaughtered: – my friend, my best friend,
My neighbour, my relative, my only sister.

(74-76)

Fram's *An entfder der velt* offers testament to

the suffering of the whole of Jewish people and of his parents, where “*s’hot zayn letstn Shma Yisroel oysgelebt mayn tate, / Vu s’hot mayn mame oysgehoykht ir letstn hoykh*” / “my father lived out his last *Shma Yisroel, / my mother breathed her last breath of air*” (3-4), and “*Vu brider zaynen tsu dem toyt farlitene gegangen, / Vu oyfhelekh geshtelt hobn in vakh zeyer shtiln trot*” / “Where brothers went to their deaths with resignation, / Where infants trod their quiet shaky steps” (5-6), as they “*Hot men keseyder unz geharget un gevorn? – / Vos greser s’iz der mord – alts freylekher iz zey.*” / “They constantly killed and choked us? – / The greater the killing – the happier they are” (13-1).

In addition, the poem lists the cities that were destroyed:

*Azoy zaynen gegangn yidn tsu dem shayter –
Fun Varshe un Pariz, fun Kovne un fun Bon.
Milyonen hobn zikh getsoygn vayter, vayter
Tsum shvartsn eshafot ... oy, gantse zeks milyon!*

Thus did the Jews go to the pyre –
From Warsaw and Paris, from Kovne and from
Bonn.
Millions were drawn further, further
To black execution scaffolds ... oh, a whole six
million!

(17-20)

Fram’s poetic texts give voice to those who were silenced, functioning as testimony as well as literature. These Holocaust poems evoke Fram’s personal responses to the fate of a silenced people, going some way to resisting the historical amnesia of the Lithuanian Holocaust.

Poetry and Prayer

Fram’s poem *Lesterung* decries the way his Jewish compatriots were doomed despite their belief in God and describes his own loss of belief as a result:

*Ikh hob mayn altn Got in hartsn merer nisht
getrogn,
Un kh’hob zikh keyn al-kheynt fartsitert nisht
geshlogn,
...
Hob ikh shoynt merer nisht gezogt ma toyvu
ohalekho....*

I no longer carried my old God in my heart,
I no longer in trepidation said *al-kheynt*
...

I no longer said *ma toyvu ohalekho....*
(35-36, 39)

He also gives up donning *tfilin*:²⁷

*In tfilin-zekl hobn lang gefoylt shoynt mayne tfilin!
Es hot zikh der shel-rosh badekt dort mit a grinem
shiml,*

*Un s’iz mayn talis heyliker farsheemt geblibn
lign.*

My *tfilin* have long been rotting in my *tfilin* bag!
And the *shel-rosh* has become covered with a
green mildew,
And my holy *talis* lay shamefully unused.

(42-44)

As he battles with these conflicts, he confronts his shame at having abandoned these rituals, whereas the victims were murdered for their beliefs. He addresses God directly, expressing his disillusionment and bitterness in “*Hostu aleynt zey gor gefirt tsu shekhtn in Treblinka*” / “You yourself took them to be slaughtered in Treblinka” (70), and accuses him outright in, “*Derfar hostu di gazoyvns farfult mit mayne brider, / Un hostu dem gzar aroysgelost – dayn stade tsu farbrenen?*” / “Therefore you loaded the gas ovens with my brothers, / And pronounced your decree – to burn your flock?” (77-78). The reference to the Jewish people as His ‘flock’ is in keeping with the poet’s pastoral Lithuanian background, and echoes the psalms of the Shepherd and his shepherd, David, contrasting with the reference to the extermination camp.

In *Dos letste kapitl*, the lists of personal artifacts memorialise individuals and intensify the build up of anguish at their annihilation,

*A shleyer ikh ze fun a yidishe kale,
Ot ze ikh a shtrayml, a yidishe hitl,
Un ot iz a vaysen, a heyliker kitl.
Ot valgert zikh elnt a zilberner beker
Fun velkhn mayn tate gemakht hot nokh
kidesh ...*

A veil I see of a Jewish bride,
Here I see a fur hat, a Jewish hat,
And here is a white, a holy *kitl*.²⁸
Here lies in desolation a silver goblet
With which my father still made *Kidush*...
(69-73)

The clothing and jewellery also become symbols of their owners,

*Ot trogstu di hemder fun unzere zeydes,
Vos oysgeton hostu fun zeyere layber.
Ot trogn mit khutspe atsind dayne vayber,
Di tsirungen fun mayn gehargeter bobn,
Vos unter mayn shvel du host tsinish bagrobn.*

Here you wear the shirts of our grandfathers,
Which you stripped from their bodies.
Here your wives wear now with impertinence,
The jewelry of my murdered grandmother,
That you cynically buried at my lintel.
(61-66)

The poem ends with the crematorium:

*Oy, Got, of hostu shoyngezen, vi izavektsuzamen
Tsum shayter-hoyfn nokhamol dayn gantser
groyser kool,
Un zikh gelozn far dayn shem fartsukn fun di
flamen –
Fun vanent s'hot aroysgeshpart der letster Shma
Yisroel ...*

Alas, God, now you have seen, how together
they have gone
To the pyre-mounds once again your whole great
community,
And they let themselves be gobbled up by the
flames for the sake of your name –
From where was sighed the final *Shma
Yisroel ...*

(79-82)

The poem may be likened to the *kadish*, intoned at the graveside and on the *yortsayt*, providing a fitting memorial for the dead as a tombstone would. This is particularly poignant, given that this was denied those buried in mass graves or incinerated.

Fram's poems provide a place for the poet to invoke his God and to address religious and spiritual concerns about matters of life and death. They offer lines of continuity to the ruins, recording a personal response to history, enabling the imaginative reconstruction of past events and reassembling the shards of the Shoah, of a lost culture, the once-vibrant Jewish community in Eastern Europe.

Fram's Life and his Poems

Fram's journeys between Lithuania, Russia, France, South Africa, England and Rhodesia epitomise those of the wandering Jew, and the resulting loss of his family and home influenced the content of his poems. Thus the poem *Mayn opfor* is subjective, self-reflective, introspective and emotional. Given the detailed references to his sister sewing the shirt for him, his mother packing sweetmeats and his father waving goodbye, the 'I' of the poem may be inferred to be the poet himself. Similarly, *Mayn mame hot mir tsugeshikt a kishn* may also be read as an evocation of the poet's experience of immigration, the cushion and poem both serving as containers for his personal journey: Fram did not return to Lithuania and never again enjoyed such times of family togetherness.

In addition, in that Fram's own family became victims of history, his Holocaust poems may also be read as autobiographical. In 1942 his mother, Shifre Mine, father Yoysef Ber and sister Ester who had remained in Lithuania were murdered in the Ponevezh death camp,²⁹ as were many members of his extended family. Knowledge of these facts offer the reader additional insights into Fram's life and poems.

Fram's continuing connection with his mother tongue and homeland perpetuates links between Lithuania and the South African Diaspora, mingling

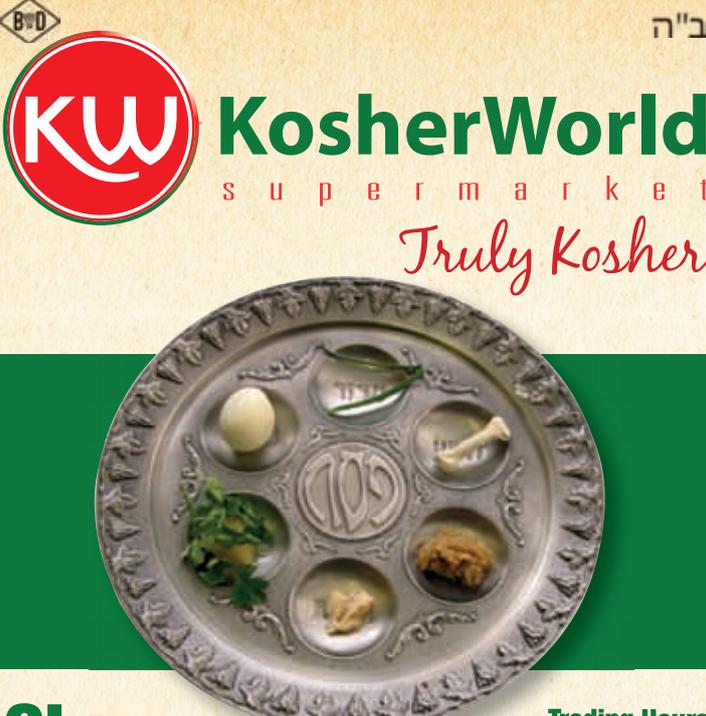
his feelings of attachment to what he left behind with his responses to Africa, providing greater understanding of a particular Jewish immigrant's Diasporic experience. For Fram, Yiddish remained a linguistic homeland where he could recover and reconstruct the world of the *shetl*, emblematic of resistance to its destruction. Although not one of its eleven official languages, its poetry also contributes to a deeper understanding of South African culture. In addition, ours is the last generation that will be able to speak to or see survivors of the Shoah in the flesh. Seeking "balm for the heart",³⁰ Fram's poetry offers an important vehicle for preservation, bearing witness and offering testimony, going some way to resist historical amnesia of a lost world. Rather than remaining silent, Fram attached metaphor to memory to commemorate a lost community.

NOTES

- 1 Sherman, J (ed), *From a Land Far Off: South African Yiddish Stories*, Cape Town: Jewish Publications, 1987, p14
- 2 Liptzin, S, *The Maturing of Yiddish Literature*, New York: Jonathan David, 1970, p251
- 3 Email communication, 10/7/2010.
- 4 The frontier area between the German and Russian Empires designated by the Czar for the Jews of Russia, where they suffered forced removals, pogroms and prejudice, antisemitism and genocide.
- 5 Wilkomir.
- 6 Liptzin, p251
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Email correspondence with Kenneth Moss, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Johns Hopkins, 6/7/2010.
- 9 Yidishkeyt in the religious sense means "Jewish learning, observance, mitsves, kashres, shul, but in the worldly sense it means secular Jewish nationalism" (Cedrick Ginsberg, e-mail 23/9/ 2011).
- 10 Langfield quoted in Cesarini, D., T. Kushner & M. Shain, eds. *Place and Displacement in Jewish History and Memory*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009, p2.
- 11 Ravitsh, M, 'Dovid Fram un zayne lider' ('David Fram and his Songs'), *Literarische Bleter*, 4/11/1932, p 403.
- 12 'Kaffir eating houses' (eating-place for black workers) established by concession on mine property during the gold industry's boom period. Numerous fictional accounts describe the lives of white, Yiddish-speaking immigrants employed there. This was often the only employment they could get. It was badly paid and conditions were poor.
- 13 Ravitsh, p403.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Sherman, J, 'Singing with the Silence: The Poetry of David Fram' in *Jewish Affairs*. Sept.-Oct. 1988.
- 16 To distinguish the use of these English names, the poet places them in scare quotes.
- 17 Foreign words incorporated by Fram in his poems have been spelt differently in the transliterations and translations, according to language rules.
- 18 These pejorative epithets were regarded as acceptable at the time, examples also occurring in the stories of H. Ehrlich and R. Feldman, and many immigrant writers showed sympathy to the underdog, congruent with their personal experience

- of racial persecution.
- 19 Davis, B, 'David Fram, Yiddish Poet.' *The Jewish Quarterly*, Winter 1988, pp45-49.
 - 20 This was a separate province in South Africa, now incorporating the provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North-West Province.
 - 21 Itinerant peddler; traveling salesman.
 - 22 English words have been transliterated in Yiddish.
 - 23 The version of Matatulu in *Dorem Afrike* is 225 lines in length. When it appeared in FA shvalb oyfn dakh (1983), 88 lines were cut. I have transliterated and translated the longer version as it includes references to the pass laws which are pertinent to my discussion.
 - 24 Customary bride price amongst Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele tribes.
 - 25 'Pass' (dompas). The document every black person was required by law to carry at all times.
 - 26 The original 68-page version appeared in pamphlet form. Fram made repeated alterations to it, and these handwritten and typed drafts and versions can be seen in his archives

- at the University of Texas, Austin. Leftwich translated it in rhyming couplets in the style of the original, but Fram only permitted him to print a short extract in *The Golden Peacock* (631-632), where it appeared under the title of 'The Slaughter in Lithuania.' Fram's personal copy of this unpublished translation is noted as being in the library of the University of the Witwatersrand, but could not be located. A second translation of part of the poem by Barry Davis, appears in Sherman's article 'Singing in the Silence'. My own translation is of the Yiddish extract that appeared in *Dorem Afrike* (Jan.-Mar.1984 12) and is the one referred to here.
- 27 Phylacteries.
 - 28 White garment in which a deceased Jew is buried; also worn by many religious Jews on Yom Kippur.
 - 29 Yad Vashem testimony documents (6332599, 6332600, 6332601), submitted by Fram's nephew.
 - 30 Sherman, J, 'David Fram Centenary Tribute', <http://shakti.trincoll.edu/~mendele/tmr/tmr08001.htm>. 1-17, 2004.



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LEVINSKY'S CHILDREN IN CONTEXT: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AND A NEW TRANSLATION

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Cedric Ginsberg

1959 saw the posthumous publication of Nehemiah Levinsky's book of stories. Called *Der Regn hot farshpetikt – Dertseylungen fun Dorem Afrike*¹ (The rains came late – stories of South Africa), it was a remarkable collection for its time.

Not much is known about Levinsky. He lived in Bloemfontein and was very active in the town's Yiddish life. He and Berl Levinsky even tried in the 1930s to publish a Yiddish journal, called *Freystater Baginen* – “Free State Dawn”. Only a few issues appeared and it seems that the journal did not receive much support from the major Yiddish centres in Johannesburg and Cape Town. From the outset, the publication of Yiddish cultural materials in Johannesburg was beset by major difficulties, mainly of a financial nature. The first journal, *Dorum Afrike*, only existed for a few months. The re-appearance² of *Dorem Afrike* in 1928 was a little more successful – it survived until March 1930 and limped on under the name of the *Yidishe Tribune* until the middle of 1932³. The attempt at publishing a journal in as small a centre as Bloemfontein was therefore a very valiant one.

Nehemiah Levinsky was not a prolific writer. It would seem that this little book contains much, if not most of his literary output. It was published by *Mishpokhe Farlag* – Family Publishers, apparently by his family and friends. The stories were probably written during the late 1920s through to the early 1940s – none of them are dated. He died in 1957, aged 56, after several years of severe illness. The book was published more than ten years after the Nationalist government had come to power. Some key elements of Apartheid policy had already been introduced, such as Bantu Education, more strictly enforced pass laws and the banning of the Communist Party of SA. Strong criticism of government policy was closely monitored by the security police. However, the latter had no access to or apparently no

interest in critical writing in Yiddish. Thus the writings of Leibl Feldman, presenting a Communist perspective of the early history of Johannesburg and South African Jewry, were published in Yiddish unhindered. Publication in English would have resulted in an immediate banning order. It is doubtful too whether Levinsky's story of the friendship of Hassie, a little Afrikaans boy and Zulu, a little black boy, could have been published in English.

This story, ‘Children’ (*Kinder*) brought here in translation, is a very problematic one. It is the tale of a love-hate relationship between two boys. Hassie, son of a poor white farm labourer, is portrayed as being superior in every way to Zulu, son of an exploited poverty-stricken domestic worker. Hassie's father drinks heavily and assaults him and his mother. Hassie in turn often beats Zulu – and this portrayed, in the story, as acceptable behaviour by both boys. Socially, both boys belong to the “lower class” – yet Hassie's ‘innate’ social standing is higher than Zulu's simply because he is white. The friendship seems to continue as long as this perceived hierarchy is recognised. As soon as the equilibrium is disturbed, so is the ‘viability’ of the friendship. It is Hassie's greatest dream to visit the big city. When his teacher announces to the class that all the children in the province will travel to the capital for a few days, he can hardly contain his excitement. This exhilaration is dampened somewhat when it emerges that Zulu will also be going on the school trip with his school. Hassie has a complete ‘melt-down’ when he realises that he may not be able to make the trip because the family cannot afford the costs. He is enraged at the prospect of Zulu going on the trip while he most likely remains at home. At this point it seems that the racial issue takes over – how is it that Zulu who is black, will go on the trip and he, Hassie who is white, will not? Hassie's reaction is to turn to violence – this is how he sees how issues are solved in the family. He seeks out his unsuspecting friend and beats him until he bleeds – all the while muttering the highly pejorative term “*kaffer*”. The description of the fight is very graphic, a terrible release

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of raw racial tension. It ceases only when a blow to Zulu hurts Hassie's hand and recoils in pain. The fight seems to relieve Hassie's rage – we are not told what effect it had on Zulu. The boys end up rolling in the dust in laughter, with tear-stained faces. The episode as described seemed so traumatic for both boys that its mild outcome, their laughter together, appears incongruous. Apart from the occasional beating dispensed by Hassie, their relationship is described as warm and human, a friendship between two little boys. Both are aware of racial divide – Zulu is afraid to be seen in the white cemetery – he knows that white adults would certainly not approve. There is even a measure of 'resistance' on the part of Zulu. The boys had been to the cemetery to visit Hassie's *Ouma's* grave. A discussion arises between them concerning heaven – Hassie believed there must be a 'location' heaven for blacks. Zulu responded thus:

...Dort muz oykh far undz shvartse zayn shlekht. Got iz dokh a vayser, un yezus zayn zun iz oykh geven a vayser, un vayshe hobn nit lib di shvartse. Neyn, Hassie, ikh vel mer nit davnen tsum vaysn got, ikh darf im nit... (...It must be bad for us blacks there too. God is after all white, and Jesus His son was also white, and whites don't like blacks. No, Hassie, I won't pray to the white God any more, I don't need Him...)

This was quite a shocking statement for the Apartheid era. Hassie, indeed was so taken aback he wanted to react by beating Zulu. However, wrote Levinsky, he refrained, because "he was afraid Zulu would run away".

It is interesting that this story does contain a single Jewish character. The characters described are all Afrikaners and Blacks. The Magistrate's name is Mr Cooper (in Yiddish קופער). This could be transliterated as Kuper (Jewish?), or Cooper (English?) – I chose the latter since there was no suggestion that he might have been Jewish. Regarding transliterations and translation equivalents, I used the words *Oupa* (*Zeyde* in the text), *Ouma* (*Bobe* in the text), *Predikant*, *Diaken*, *spruit*, *veld* – because they seemed to me to be in keeping with the spirit of the story.

Dovid Wolpe, editor of *Dorem Afrike* at the time, wrote a brief appraisal of the newly published work. He regarded it as a very important addition to Yiddish writing in South Africa,⁴ and considered the story *Children* as one of the best in the book. He published the last part of this story together with his article. The fragment opens with Zulu's retrieval of his buried 'fortune'. No introductory information is presented. We do not know that the previous scene told of the terrible beating of Zulu by Hassie. The

piece contains within it several interesting aspects of Levinsky's writing. Firstly, the stark contrast in the way the white children are treated on the trip compared with the almost dismissive way the black children are handled. Secondly, the "*oyfrekhtikayt un emesdikayt*"⁵ – the honesty and the genuineness of the story comes through. Levinsky describes life in the village the way he sees it, with all its problems and imperfections. Thirdly, Levinsky presents a fictional reality to the reader. He makes no direct social criticism in the narrative – this emerges implicitly, if the reader is sensitive to comments. He seems to be saying: Look at the social and political setting within which these children are interacting – can this be right?

South Africa has undergone radical change since this story was written. Unfortunately, the society still grapples with many of issues that emerge from it, including racism and domestic violence. Levinsky's stories, even though they are few in number, form an important part of the South African literary 'canon' in Yiddish. They deserve to be studied – to contribute to a greater understanding of our history.

CHILDREN

Nehemiah Levinsky

(translated by Cedric Ginsberg)

Hassie was already eleven years old and had never left his father's house. He knew the village where they lived very well: he knew where there were tasty plums for the picking, where one could nibble grapes, where there was a hole in the fence and one could easily climb through it, where there was a deep pit where one could play with friends, hide oneself from a drunk father or simply take a nap on a hot summer's afternoon. Should a stranger ask for an address, enquire about somebody in the village: where a certain person lived, what he did, Hassie knew it all and was ready himself to take the stranger to the required address. He was also not lazy to run an errand. He often earned a sweet or a penny for delivering a little package to someone.

Hassie knew that somewhere beyond the mountains there were big cities, spread out, with high walls, with houses like great crates, just like the pictures in the books he loved to page through. But he had no accurate concept of the cities, they seemed alien and nebulous to him. Sometimes, lying with eyes closed on the hot sand in the veld,

he would try to imagine the cities and put his ear to the ground, trying to discern even the slightest sound, a noise that could come from the city. The great white city became a dream for him and would sit for hours in a pit or in the sand, planning how to get there. But they remained dreams, he could never travel to the city, his parents were too poor.

His father worked on a farm and hardly earned enough for food, so he could not afford to spend money on a ticket to the city and there could certainly be no talk of taking Hassie with. If a spare shilling actually turned up in the house, his father immediately took it to the bar, bought a bottle of cheap liquor and got drunk. Arriving home intoxicated he would soon beat his wife or Hassie.

Hassie tried to escape his father's blows. He would trail his father and when he saw him go home drunk, he would run away somewhere else. But sometimes his father would beat him even when he was sober. Then there was nothing Hassie could do to avoid it. After receiving the hiding he would wipe the tears from his eyes with his fist and run out to play in the street. When his father beat him particularly badly, he would go to the edge of the village, and seek out a little black boy there. He would call to him, throw him to the ground and beat him, often until there was blood. Then he would run away satisfied. He had several such victims. He would often play with them: fishing, catching frogs, picking fruit. They were loyal to Hassie and looked to him as a leader accepting the blows as something due to them.

At school Hassie was a diligent pupil, although he did not study much. He grasped things easily and effortlessly and prepared his lessons quickly and punctually. Often his mother would reproach him when he completed his homework in such a short time. She did not believe that he had really finished his work. She would scold him, call him lazy, forbid him going out to play. But at the end of the term he would proudly bring the school report to his mother. "You see", he would tell her, "Hassie is not lazy, Hassie is a good student". His mother would pat him lovingly, or kiss him with her full lips and say: "Yes, study Hassie, you could become a clerk in the Magistrate's office, perhaps even a Magistrate". Hassie's chest would swell with joy, his heart would beat faster and he would think contentedly about how years later, he would sit there in the white house and judge people, send them to prison and fine them and even give them lashes. Everyone would respect him, like portly old Magistrate Cooper. They would take their hats off in his presence and stop to chat.

He could not keep his dreams concealed within himself; he needed to pour out his heart

to someone. In those moments he would slip out of the house, climb through several fences, go down into the valley to the *spruit*, where the "location" lay with its small clay huts. There the roofs are covered with stones and pieces of plank, there the windows are bare holes, looking like extinguished eye-panes. And in the ditch, where lean dogs wander about together with thin black children, looking for bones in the garbage and sand, there Hassie would roll down with a cry. He would chase away the dogs and the black children would scatter. Only one, Zulu, would remain. He would cower in his torn jacket and wait for the blows. But today Hassie is not beating. He takes Zulu by a button of his patched jacket and pulls him along.

Zulu is a black child of the same age as Hassie, with a head of curly black tousled hair, tangled in lines reminiscent of rows in a plantation. He would follow Hassie with his hands dangling at his sides, like a monkey, watching with wide trusting eyes not knowing whether a game or a beating awaited him. Both Hassie and Zulu are slight, thin, restless scamps. They became friends apart from all the other children. They played horses together, they dug and built, caught birds and naked warmed themselves in the sun. And when good fortune sent them a few sweets, both their mouths were smeared with the sweetness which they shared. The blows which Hassie often dispensed to him, Zulu accepted with indifference, as if it were part of a game.

"Zulu, you know", Hassie stopped him on the other side of the ditch, "I'm going to be a Magistrate like Mr Cooper. My ma says that if I study well, I can really become a Magistrate. You know *baas* Cooper don't you? When I grow up, I will judge like him. I'll put people in prison like him. Zulu, how do you like that? Hassie will be a big *baas*, a Magistrate".

Zulu's face melted into a radiant smile: "That will be great. You, Hassie will be a big *baas*, a magistrate, you'll drive a motor-car. Will you judge me too, Hassie?"

"Yes, Zulu, I'll judge you too. If you steal or go around without a *pass* I'll certainly judge you, but I won't put you in prison for long, perhaps a few weeks".

Zulu beamed and contentedly danced around Hassie singing:

"Hassie is a magistrate, Hassie will judge everyone and he will acquit Zulu".

"Yes, Zulu, you will drive my motor-car, we will both go to town, or I will make you a policeman, but both of us will go to town".

Hassie would embrace Zulu and hug him affectionately and together they rolled in the white sand, like a black-white flaxen skein...

* * *

The town lived off the farmers. There people celebrated their joy and mourned in their sadness. Early in the morning with sleep still on their eyelids, they looked to the horizon, seeking a cloud – a messenger of rain and felt whether the wind on the face came from the direction of the rain. Often when the rains were late, they were saddened and they dreamt together with the farmers of dark steely clouds and leaden skies. When someone's calf was born, the whole village knew thereafter how much milk the cow produced. When a housewife's hen fell dead, the next day all the women dosed their hens with Epsom salts... At night, when one visited a neighbour, everyone – young and old – spoke about rain, about sowing corn, about cows which produced four-five buckets of milk, about sheep that had fallen prey to foxes. They listened as if to a miracle as an old *boer* related, how the sheep survived a terrible drought. And how a two-day rain saved a field of *mielies*...

That was the environment in which Hassie grew up. They lived on one side of the village, in a humble little house hidden by little trees. In the home furniture was placed very close together. On the walls – a couple of pictures of old Boers, several drawings from old calendars and in the middle a large picture of General de Wet. All of this had been hanging on the walls for years, in the same places. Hassie had soaked in the conversations, borne the concerns together with the adults, furrowed his young brow with the worries of the old Boers. In hot dry summers he dreamed of damp meadows and green fields and also of the huge multi-storied boxes, that were called a city.

Once Zulu came with some news: they were opening a school in the "Location" and he, Zulu, was going to attend. He would learn everything just like Hassie, and would, when they were grown up go to the city with him.

"Yes, Zulu, learn quicker, we'll be able to go together", Hassie happily agreed with his friend.

The African sun burns down on Hassie's little white body, reddens him, then he turns brown and later his body darkens. The same sun burns down and also caresses Zulu's little black body.

The days stretch on and turn into weeks. Zulu often meets Hassie and tells him, repeating word for word what the teacher has taught him. He asks whether his teacher teaches the same stuff as Hassie's teacher teaches the white children. With great importance Hassie gives his opinion and advises him what to learn.

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Hassie's *Oupa* lived in the village, an old *Boer*, a former missionary. He lived with his wife, Hassie's *Ouma* apart from Hassie's parents. He was shocked that Hassie's father drank so heavily. The grandfather wore a long black jacket with a starched collar and a white bow-tie. He always carried a prayer-book under his arm. He was not well liked, he was quite stern and had an angry

demeanour. Hassie seldom went to him and even less frequently visited his *Ouma*. She spent most of her time in bed, surrounded by little bottles of medicine, with herbs and little cups of water which exuded a strange odour of oldness.

One day his mother told him that *Ouma* had died. He did not go to school that day. His mother dressed him in festive clothes, bought him a new pair of shoes, a black dress and a black hat for herself. His father put on his Sunday suit, sewed a crepe bow to his hat and his sleeve, looked around sober and angrily, and they all went to *Oupa's* house. There it was quiet. *Ouma* lay in a coffin covered in flowers. Inside and outside the house there were old and young *Boer* women all dressed in black. In their hands they held little prayer-books or little Bibles bound in leather, together with their sunshades. They were sitting along the wall and in the middle of the room there was large table on which rested the casket with the dead body. There was a hush each time someone entered the room. If a man, he would remove his hat, shake hands with the neighbours, quietly ask after their health and begin complaining about the drought. Then it would once again become quiet. Others shuffled from one group to another and spoke about the weather. If, however, a woman entered, the attention of the bystanders was immediately drawn to her outfit and what sort of wreath she brought. And when someone brought a wreath which was better and more artistically braided with a more lavish ribbon, one could hear an approving murmur from those present as they glanced enviously at the friends of the dead woman.

Hassie stood outside near the stoep, feeling a little uncomfortable in his new shoes and festive clothes. He would rather have been playing, but he was afraid of his father and watched everything that was going on in the house with interest.

A strong wind was blowing and the dust stung the eyes. Hassie was delighted to see people bending and grabbing their hats. The women carried the wreaths behind them and turned with them against the wind. Hassie ran forward wanting to help them carry the wreaths, but none of the women wanted to let go of her wreath, blocking it with their heavy stout bodies. Upon entering the house they would compose themselves and with a sad expression would place the wreath next to the coffin, they would sit down and begin to wipe their eyes with a handkerchief. Tears would appear and their noses became reddened. They chatted quietly.

Everyone waited for the *Predikant*. Eventually he arrived in a small shiny black automobile. He was accompanied by his young wife, both in black. He drove to the entrance of the house, stopped his car but did not alight. Several elderly Boers, a *Diaken* and Church Elder ran towards the car, opened the door and great respect waited for him to alight. The *Predikant* was still young, but he was a stout man with a large belly, and he climbed out of the car with effort. His admirers assisted him to take out his little religious books and a

thick Bible in a golden frame with many pieces of paper placed between the pages. In one hand he held his prepared sermon. He shook the hand of each person around the car and enquired: “*Hoe gaan dit?*” He stopped next to Hassie, stroked his head looking as though he stroked the head of an orphan. However, remembering that the deceased had only adult children, he quickly entered the house. He stopped in the middle of the room, greeted everyone, called a *Diaken* said something to him and immediately started the prayers. He said a quiet prayer, with eyes tightly closed. Everyone bowed their heads and repeated the prayers in a distressed tone. There was a buzz like in a beehive.

Initially Hassie also kept his head bowed and tried to repeat the prayers, but he soon became bored. He began to observe the people around him, sought a friend with his eyes, but did not see anyone. On the stoep, not far from him stood a little girl holding a little prayer-book in her hands, swinging it and shaking it childishly. The prayer ended and everyone lifted their heads in relief, opened their eyes and looked around as if trying to convince themselves that they were still in the same place they were standing a few minutes before. The *Predikant* called out the number of a Psalm and immediately a *Diaken* who was standing next to him began singing the Psalm in a very loud voice. The voice coming out of the room sounded so strange that the little girl burst into resounding laughter. Hassie also could not restrain himself and their laughter resounded above the singing in the death-room. Someone scolded Hassie, and the little girl took fright and ran away.

After the singing the *Predikant* delivered a sermon. Hassie listened attentively and looked at the *Predikant*'s lips, as he pronounced his words so slowly, drawn out, as if he were pushing something out of his mouth. He spoke for a long time. Hassie did not grasp everything. Eventually the *Predikant* turned to the old Missionary, Hassie's *Oupa*, and to his children and said in an authoritative voice, that they should not mourn, for their wife and mother has gone to the Garden of Eden where she lives happily near Jesus. He pointed his finger towards the heavens. Hassie followed the finger, looked for something in the blueness of the horizon, but he saw nothing. He began to long for the big cities and he imagined to himself that the Garden of Eden, about which the *Predikant* had just spoken, was that kind of city.

People prepared to leave, others pushed towards the exit. Women held small kerchiefs in their hands and blew their noses. They carried the casket out followed by the old grandfather weeping bitterly. The children also cried. Hassie stood to one side and wondered why *Oupa* who was himself a *Predikant* - Missionary, was crying now, even though the young minister had said they should not mourn for *Ouma*, because she had gone to a better world, to the Garden of Eden. He asked his mother why his grandfather did not listen to the *Predikant* and wept so much, but his father called

him away and told him to go and sit on one of the wagons with an old man. The procession of cars and wagons left slowly for the cemetery. There the old man stopped the horses and gave the reins to Hassie. He warned him not to leave the horses alone. Hassie wanted very badly to follow the crowd to see how they buried the grandmother, but he was afraid to abandon the horses – so he remained seated on the wagon.

* * *

The cemetery was a mile from the village, surrounded by a stone wall, which shone in the distance like a painted square. From the gate there were tree-lined avenues paved with gravel, adorned on both sides by tall old eucalyptus trees. In each avenue there was a row of graves, some old, collapsed, others fenced around with iron rods and adorned with marble monuments, many had great brick tombstones and crosses. Silence reigned in the cemetery. Seldom a bird even twittered there and then was immediately silent.

Hassie walked through the avenues and sought the recent grave of his *Ouma*. Behind him Zulu trailed cautiously. He constantly looked around uneasily, wanting to satisfy himself that no white person would see him here. He knew that also here, at the last resting place of the whites, a black is an unwanted guest and if they would find him here he would be beaten. But he had to go, Hassie had called him, and his curiosity drew him to see the “white” cemetery.

Both little boys walked slowly along the avenues, stopping at the marble monuments, looking inquisitively at the graves and speaking softly, as if fearing that the dead would hear them. Eventually they arrived at a new grave, where the soil had not yet fallen in and tens of withered flower wreaths lay around.

“This must be where my *Ouma* lies”, Hassie said quietly. “No one has been buried here in the last three weeks, and the flowers are not yet completely withered. Come Zulu, kneel down, let's pray for *Ouma*'s soul. My ma said so.

“But, Hassie, you told me that your *Ouma* has gone to the Garden of Eden and that she is happy, so why should we pray for her?”

“Yes, Zulu, that's what the *Predikant* said, but *Oupa* apparently didn't believe him. He wept a lot after *Ouma* died. Even today he is still sad. My mother says, that we are all sinners and we do not go straight to the heaven. Perhaps my *Ouma* is also not there.”

Zulu considered this for a while and asked: “And our black people, Hassie, do they also go to heaven?”

Hassie's jaw dropped in surprise, but he soon composed himself: “Perhaps blacks go to heaven - ‘locations’ – there must be such a place there for Blacks to live”.

Zulu lowered his head and picking up a pebble said apprehensively:

“Yes, it’s true. It must be bad for us blacks there too. God is after all white, and Jesus His son was also white, and whites don’t like blacks. No, Hassie, I won’t pray to the white God any more, I don’t need Him”.

Hassie looked at Zulu in confusion, and wanted to defend the wrong against God by beating Zulu. But he was scared that Zulu would run away so he remained silent. A short while later Zulu suggested to Hassie that they visit the black cemetery. Hassie agreed.

They climbed over the white stone wall, which separated the two cemeteries. In the black cemetery the graves were very close to one another. Here and there stood a small stone with an inscription. On others there were small crosses made from nailed together box-planks. On some of them one could read the name of a soap manufacturer, from where the box originated. On almost every grave were strewn broken plates, glasses, empty canned goods tins and broken tea-pots. Each grave looked like a plundered workshop, with traces of kitchenware. Zulu pointed to one of the graves, which was enclosed on the sides with the frame of an old iron bed, and said proudly:

“You see, Hassie, there my father lies”.

Hassie stopped near the grave, and looked at Zulu in astonishment, slapping him on the shoulder:

“Zulu, is this your father’s grave? And I thought your father was alive. How long since he died?”

Last year, of cholera. Many people in the Location died”.

“Zulu, your father must have been a good boy; I wish he could get a good job there in heaven”.

* * *

On hard planks people sleep five together, ten in a room. The huts sway in the wind, the roofs are low, bearing down on the head, burning hot tin roofs, which cool down with the sound of a cracking whip. Here sleep people dark as the night, black as shadows and they do not dream. They are exhausted from the scorching days, from hard work, from pouring sweat while digging gardens, carrying heavy sacks, looking after white children, from hammering and building, from blows and indignity. People sleep with open doors, with windows that look like the blind holes of eye-potsherd and their breathing is audible, freed from the day-slavery.

It is quiet in the village. All lights have long been extinguished. The streets are empty. Somewhere far away at the edge of the *spruit* a dog barks, a puppy awakens and replies with a hoarse high-pitched bark.

But now Hassie cannot sleep. He has lain half the night and cannot fall asleep. For a long time he kept his eyes closed, tried putting the cushion under his feet and throwing off the warm blanket, but sleep evaded him. The teacher told the class that day that in three months- time there would be a special get-together of all the pupils in the capital of the province. The tour would last four days

and the children of the province would have the opportunity of visiting all the museums, buildings, factories, as well as the special School-Exhibition. The teacher also announced that each pupil would have to pay five shillings towards expenses, each one must have a new uniform, proper shoes and a hat. Hassie listened to the teacher with a pounding heart. He could hardly wait for classes to finish and he ran home. He met his mother in the kitchen, as always, busy with the pots in the oven. He told her the good news, that he would travel to the big city. He spoke with such excitement, that his mother who was not in a good mood that day patted him with a smile. She did not want to express her doubts, so as not to dash his hopes. She thought to herself that Hassie’s trip would not be realised because of the suit. Well, the pants she could sew up herself, but a jacket and shoes would have to be purchased and the five shillings was also a heavy expense. She did not tell him – why should she disappoint him now already?

From his mother Hassie ran to the ditch, looking for Zulu, but since he had not arrived yet, he tried playing with the other black boys but did not rest. He ran along the road to the Location, to see if Zulu was on his way. In the distance he noticed Zulu’s little form and he ran to meet him. Zulu was also running and bouncing, after each jump he gave a drag with his foot, leaving a cloud of dust, which spread out on the sides of the path. Zulu shouted to him breathlessly:

“I have just come from School! Only now from School!”

“Why so late?” asked Hassie, who had in the meantime forgotten his own news.

Zulu answered him proudly: “We are preparing for Education-Week, so the teacher is teaching us to sing. Hassie I am going to the big city, to the big city I go!”

Hassie turned up his nose, spat with disdain: “I don’t have to sing, nevertheless I will also travel to the city for Education-Week.

Zulu stopped jumping and listened to what Hassie had to tell him. Thereafter like a wild colt he twisted over in the veld, noisily doing somersaults and turned towards Hassie:

“This means, Hassie, we will both travel to the city, we’ll have a great ‘holiday’. Listen, to the beautiful songs I learned today”.

With shining eyes, which reflected the joy of this future vacation, he sang out the first bars of a song which the blacks sing. Hassie was ready to interrupt his song, but the singing so fascinated him he listened quietly to his friend and even tried to assist him.

In the quiet of night Hassie now relived the whole joyous day. Only when behind Hassie’s room the hens began to flap their wings and greeted the early morning with crowing, did Hassie, exhausted from thinking, eventually fall asleep.

* * *

For little Hassie the three months crawled by very slowly. He longed the days to pass by, feverish with expectation. When his mother once mentioned that she did not know how she would afford to buy him a jacket, he went pale and began to sob quietly. He appeared so helpless, so vulnerable, so small, that his mother was startled by the impression her words had made on him. She began caressing him with her brown hard gnarled hard-working hands, cuddling and reassuring him. It was then that she vowed to provide everything for the trip. Hassie continued whimpering for a long time, swallowing his tears, but after his mother had repeated her pledge to buy the jacket for the umpteenth time, he finally fell silent. But some wariness remained in him, his heart was sore, wracked with tears and spasms. Quietly he left the house and sidled across the street so that no-one should see him. He crawled through several broken fences and slid down into the ditch. There, as always, scrawny black children were playing with hungry dogs. Hassie evaded them. He was embarrassed to show his red, tear-stained face. But Zulu noticed him, and as always jumped up and followed him:

“Hassie, where you running to? Don’t you want to play today?”

Zulu’s voice appeared strangely high-pitched to Hassie and full of abandon. He turned around angrily, hurled himself at his friend with all his strength and punched him in the face. He flung him to the ground and began to beat him with both hands. Zulu did not defend himself, he just turned and screamed. Hassie rained blows cruelly, beating and shouting the words through his teeth: “O, kaffer! O kaffer!”, with more blows. Suddenly his hand connected with Zulu’s hard skull. A sharp pain swept through Hassie’s limbs. His face distorted and he pulled his hand away and cradling it in the other one and ran away, still shouting “O, O, kaffer!” At edge of the pit he sat down on a stone, examined his fist blowing on it, as if the cool the pain. He was exhausted and panting, but he was pleased and thought that he had done well to beat Zulu that day. It could not be otherwise: why should a kaffer go to town, while he, a white, could not? It was this thought that he would perhaps not go to town that made him so heart-sore and great tears began to roll from his eyes. He felt such pain from this, that his dreams of the trip had been destroyed, that he forgot all about the fight. He began to look for his bruised friend. He found him lying in the same place, sobbing his whole body trembling.

When Hassie approached him Zulu lifted his black head. As he became aware of Hassie, he protected himself with his arm. He was sure that he was coming to beat him more. Zulu’s face was smeared with dust and with tears. Now, as he saw his face Hassie burst out laughing, so that Zulu’s teeth also sparkled in a smile. A minute later both of them were lying in the sand laughing, smearing filthy tears on their tearful faces.

* * *

Zulu came home at dusk. The sun threw out golden rays, lighting up the mountain peaks and sank into the distant horizon. In the “Location” it was already dark. There were no windows in Zulu’s hut. The roof lay low over the uneven walls. There was no floor in the house, but the earth was hard and clean and tidy. In the corners lay several old mattresses covered with torn blankets. In one corner stood a broken bed supported by a paraffin tin – this was his mother’s bed.

The room was dark. Next to the house sat Zulu’s two older brothers and a sister talking loudly. His mother stood over a little stove made of bricks and clay cooking a sparse supper for her children in a big pot. She often broke into her children’s conversation. Zulu ignored those around him. He had crawled in under the bed and in a corner near the wall began digging with a piece of iron. From the hole he lifted out a small, round little tin and crawled out from under the bed. He walked out of the hut, strode past the children and went round the back of the house. Stretching out on the ground he carefully opened the little tin and shook out several silver and copper coins. He began counting them, examining each one separately. Since it was quite dark he lifted each coin close to his eyes, felt it and mumbled: one shilling and six pence, one shilling and seven, one and ten, until he had counted two and six pence. He repeated the sum several times and thought he had collected a lot of money, quite a lot. His mother earned that much for doing a week’s washing. He was going to take the money with him on his trip into town. Now he took two six pennies and placed the rest back in the little tin. He closed the lid well, went back into the house and buried it in the same place under the bed. The two shiny six pennies, which he had put on one side, he tied in a little piece of rag, and pushed it in his pocket, checking to see it was not torn. He would give the shilling to Hassie the following day. How could he, Zulu, have such a large fortune and not share it with his friend? True, it had been very difficult for him to save up the money and he did not even remember how long it took him. He received six pence a few months previously from a white man for carrying a parcel from the train station. It was heavy. He had had to stop several times. He was not even sure whether the white man would give him something for his trouble: there are white people, who do not give a reward for carrying their parcels, but they even give a kick in the pants and chase one away! But this white man had given him six pence. And so the weeks and months passed. Now he was proud of his fortune and compared it to the pittance his mother earned for her hard work in doing laundry, mangling, pressing and mending. And so he decided to give a great portion of his fortune to his white friend as a gift. True, to a white, a shilling is a small sum, but it would surely be of use to Hassie.

Zulu forgot the blows he received at the hands of his friend. It was not difficult for him to part with the shilling. From childhood he had become used

to sharing everything. His mother shared her pot of mielie pap with her hungry neighbours, and his father would share his last bit of chewing-tobacco, which he would chew day in and day out.

* * *

Zulu travelled in a coach which near the engine. He travelled together with a large number of black children. At each station more and more black children would get on with their teachers. The coach was very crowded for the entire journey. They sat very squashed together. Some teachers even tried to get the children in their choirs to sing, but in view of the crowdedness, this was impossible.

Hassie was travelling on the same train. He was busy looking outside. Right from the start he occupied a place at a window, resolutely maintaining his position at the window frame and not allowing himself to be pushed away. He swallowed everything he saw along the way with his eyes, everything interested him: the rails, the telegraph-poles which slunk quickly past the train, the people reciprocated greetings, waving their hands and shouting to the passing train filled with children – everything was new, he cast his eager eyes at everything.

In the city they brought all the children to a park, where canvas booths stood ready, with blankets and straw on the ground. For the younger children wooden plank-beds had been prepared.

They took the black children to the Location where canvas tents had also been prepared for them. For three days the children walked in procession in groups with their teachers, visiting the museum and Art Exhibition. They visited the Agricultural Exhibition, several cinemas and also a theatre production.

Hassie walked in rows in procession together with other children. With his head thrown back he looked at the highest stories of the tall buildings, stared in amazement at the trams, with the clamour and ringing as they moved over the rails in the middle of the town. His head was spinning from all of this, yet he could not get enough of it all. He would certainly have forgotten to eat, were it not for the teachers, who, at exactly at twelve noon and five in the evening arranged them in rows and took them off to the marquees in the park. There were laid tables which awaited them with women dressed in white, like nurses, who served the children: sliced loaves of bread, smeared with butter, they handed out plates filled with soup, meat and vegetables.

In the three days Hassie never saw Zulu, because while the white children walked in procession from one Exhibition to the next, the black children practised and repeated their songs, which they were to sing at the Concert on the third evening of their stay in the city. Only at the time the white children went to eat, did they take the black children to the Exhibitions. They took them quickly, hurrying from one place to the second, from one street to

the next. Only in a few instances were they given any explanations about what they saw. They took them quickly from one building to another and by two o'clock in the afternoon they had already been taken back to the Location.

* * *

On the evening of the third day it was overcast. A cold wind was blowing. In a large square in the Location, temporary seating had been set out – seats for white spectators. A large crowd of white people gathered and occupied the seats that had been prepared. The blacks stood respectfully to one side. The black children's choir was arranged in rows like soldiers in the middle of the square. There were around fifteen hundred black children who together with their teachers, were to display their singing talent to the whites. It would also serve as an expression of gratitude for the hospitality. The teachers ran breathless and sweating through the rows of children, straightening them for the umpteenth time, and telling them how to behave. The wind was blowing ever stronger and the children were shivering from cold. Others, the more daring ones, began to stamp their feet and jump up and down to warm themselves up. The teachers kept an eye on them and immediately put a stop to these undisciplined movements. They were waiting for several high-ranking guests. Eventually, after a delay of half an hour, several cars arrived at the square. The black organiser of the concert greeted the late-arrivals and wanted to show them to their seats of honour but they refused, saying: "On such a cold night, it is more comfortable to sit in the car and to hear the concert from there".

The black conductor then waved his baton and the children began to sing. It was a song of praise for the whites, composed by one of the black teachers. The whites did not understand the words, they heard only the singing, which rang out from fifteen hundred children's throats into the atmosphere and twisted like strings of pearls. The notes changed like images in the cinema, and the audience sat enchanted, no longer feeling the cold and the biting wind. They simply listened to the harmonic singing of the black children.

Hassie was one of the score of white children who were brought to the concert. He sat listening to the singing of the blacks, straining his ears in an attempt to make out the voice of his friend Zulu. Eventually it was the rain which began pouring down with tropical force, that dispersed the crowd. They looked for places to shelter and one of the whites sitting in a car, gave the order for the children to disperse.

The next day Hassie and his friends left for home. In the first carriage, next to the engine, the black children were travelling, Zulu among them. He had caught a bad cold during the concert. He now had a fever and was wrapped in a blanket.

Three days after his return home Zulu died from his severe chill. Hassie found out about this

from other children, when he asked after Zulu.

It was already dusk. He ran home in terror. He wandered about the house the whole evening in confusion hardly knowing what he was doing. The next day, as soon as classes at school ended, he quickly went home. He waited until his mother went out of the kitchen and grabbed a few plates and hid them in his shirt. In the yard in a corner, he smashed the plates into small pieces which he concealed in his pockets. Then he set off for the cemetery. He climbed over the wall into the black cemetery and began to search for the fresh little grave of his friend. He found two new mounds of sand. Not knowing where Zulu lay, he emptied his pockets and strewed the broken fragments of plate over both graves...

NOTES

- 1 ז"ל יאהאנעסבורג/בלומפאנטין, פארלאג "משפחה". נחמיה לעוויןסקי, די רענן האט פארשפעטיקט – דערציילונגען פון דרום אפריקע.
- 2 The first attempt at a Yiddish cultural journal (Dorom Afrike) lasted from December 1922 to August 1923.
- 3 CJ Ginsberg, 'Forty years of Dorem Afrike and Yiddish Kultur in South Africa', in Journal for Semitics, Vol.20, No. 1, 2011, p51.
- 4 Dovid Wolpe, 'N. Levinsky un zayne rasn-dertseylungen', Dorem Afrike, June/July, 1959, pp16-17.
- 5 Ibid.



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AN I.B. SINGER RETROSPECTIVE: THE “FAMILY CHRONICLES”: THE ESTATE (1969) *

Gloria Sandak-Lewin

This is the third of a four-part essay on Isaac Bashevis Singer's great epic work, *The Manor* (1967), its sequel, *The Estate* (1969) and *The Family Moskat* (1950). The first two parts appeared in *Jewish Affairs* Rosh Hashanah 2008, and Chanukah 2012. The focus of this part continues will be *The Estate*.

A vast, sprawling work, *The Estate* is much bigger and broader than *The Manor*. It concentrates almost solely on the life, marriages and work of Calman Jacoby, an intelligent, hardworking, ambitious Jewish entrepreneur who maintains his Jewishness despite his growing wealth. In a sense it is a continuation of *The Manor*, but Singer has chosen a broader and more elaborate canvas, reminiscent of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. There is an author's note at the beginning of the book which reads: "*The Estate* is a sequel to and the conclusion of *The Manor*, published in 1967. *The Manor* begins with the Polish uprising against the Czar in 1863 and *The Estate* ends in the last years of the nineteenth century ... The whole work appeared in serial form in the *Jewish Daily Forward* between 1952 and 1955".

While *The Manor* is tight, compact and unified around a central character, Calman Jacoby, *The Estate* takes the reader into the lives of three people who, in one way and another, are associated with him: Clara Kaminer, his materialistic, immoral second wife, Ezriel Babad, his son-in-law, at odds with his religion but eventually partially returning to it, and the degenerate Polish Count Lucian who elopes with and marries one of Calman's daughters, Miriam Liebe, only to bring her to destruction. A further extension of these dramatis personae is Ezriel's nephew Zadok, an ultra-rationalist anti-Judaic secular genius and son of the beautifully spiritual Hassidic Rabbi of Marshinov. His role in the novel is dubious: is he introduced to throw Ezriel into relief - Ezriel the doubter, the conflicted Jew torn between his desire to be truly Jewish, a

practising Jew in a Jewish community, and his skepticism? If not, what is Zadok's function in the novel?

Calman Jacoby features very little in this book; Singer concentrates instead on his second wife Clara, whom he has divorced, her relationship with Alexander Zipkin, father of her daughter Felusia, Clara's brief but foolish flirtation with the old man Mirkin who wants to marry her and is the cause of Zipkin's estrangement from Clara (he claims that while she has caused him to divorce his wife Sabina and leave her and his little boy Kubus whom he loves she is flirting with the old man Mirkin because of his will). Zipkin and Clara have quarreled in Paris, each blaming the other, and Zipkin leaves Europe and goes to New York with his kind-hearted sister Sonya. There is also emphasis on Calman and Clara's son Sasha who is good-looking, wild, popular, unruly, competent in business, sexually active beyond his years and showing signs of power, business acumen and success. One of the few references to Calman Jacoby occurs when Clara goes to him to say goodbye before leaving for America to join her lover Zipkin and asks Calman to forgive her: at first denies then admits that Felusia is Zipkin's daughter (not Calman's) and asks Calman to say Kaddish for her if she should die before him. He agrees to do so but is clearly not interested in her. Calman spends Yom Kippur at his son-in-law Rabbi Jochanan's in Marshinov. Because of Clara he is poor - another son-in-law Mayer Joel runs his business and gives him something to live on - he lives alone and prays and studies but still has dreams of lust.

A large part of the novel deals with Clara's surprise visit to her former lover Zipkin, who has remarried in America. He puts her up in a German boarding-house far removed from the Jewish community. At first he visits her twice weekly. Eventually he spends a week with her and then sees her less and less frequently until ultimately she decides to return to Warsaw with Felusia. A passage in the novel wonderfully describes the hustle and bustle of the Jewish New York from which Clara is isolated. If she had been in a Jewish neighborhood she could have attended

...the Yiddish theatre, lectures, discussions, celebrations. Even in wintertime, the Jewish quarter was congested ... There were employment offices, tea parlors, and cellar restaurants, where

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home-cooking was served while musicians played. Fraternal societies held meetings. The stores remained open late. Barrels of herring, sour pickles, sauerkraut stood in front of stores. Home-baked bread, buns, challah, bagels, poppy-seed rolls and cakes were sold from pushcarts. In the delicatessen stores, people ate hot frankfurters and mustard. On East Broadway, the crowds streamed down the street in groups. They all seemed part of one family. Each ship from Europe brought socialists, bearded and long-haired revolutionaries who made speeches about the struggle for freedom. New 'greenhorns' arrived daily. Every home had a room or two rented out. Every third housewife prepared homemade meals for boarders. Yeshivas and cabarets, kosher restaurants and travel agencies, wedding halls and matrimonial bureaus abounded. Prostitutes hailed men to their rooms - sextons called them to a quorum in the synagogue. In the shops, the workers sang both liturgical and socialist songs. In the evenings, boys and girls danced in the narrow, gas-lit rooms. Every day was a holiday. But Clara was not a part of it. She wandered about the snowy sidewalks alone.¹

Another segment of the novel deals with Ezriel, Calman's son-in-law (married to Shaindel) who has moved away from Judaism and practices medicine. Like Asa Heshel in the earlier novel *The Family Moskat*, Ezriel's character is not firmly drawn - he seems always to be a divided character, at loggerheads with his destiny and with himself. Ezriel is married to Shaindel, a simple devout woman who can function only in her home and in the kitchen, is only Yiddish-speaking and is worlds apart from the modern, anti-religious, free-thinking medical doctor Ezriel. Ezriel meets the widow Olga Bielikov, a convert from Judaism to Greek Orthodoxy, at a birthday party at the Wallenbergs (wealthy and respected converted Jews) which he has attended without Shaindel (she refuses to go). In time, he has a sexual relationship with her, even though Shaindel has given birth to their third child, a boy, and Ezriel reluctantly organises and attends the circumcision. Ezriel and Shaindel's eldest child, Josiek, who is attending the university in Warsaw, informs his parents that he wants to leave Warsaw (because of the pernicious and pervasive antisemitism he has experienced at school) and goes to live in Palestine. Josiek's plans so upset and disturb Shaindel that she lapses into melancholia and gradually loses her sanity. There is also a digression about Ezriel's sister Mirale, who has been engaging in subversive political activities, has been impregnated by *agent provocateur* Stefan Lamanski (who has to flee the country for fear of his life) and has been in prison for six years before being deported to Siberia.

Yet a further strand of this complex plot concerns the exploits of Lucian (Count Jampolski's younger son), husband of Miriam Liebe and brother of Felicia. He has been imprisoned for

murdering the janitor of the complex of the absent employer of his beloved Kasia, a servant girl who has borne his illegitimate son Bolek. Tragically, Miriam Liebe has died of poverty and starvation (her father Calman Jacoby has never contacted her since she ran off with Lucian - Singer could, in the writer's opinion, have made more of this). Kasia and Lucian's children are being cared for and being brought up as Christians (Catholics) by Felicia, Lucian's sister, an unbelievably saint-like woman married to a brilliant and good, if atheist, doctor Marian Zawacki. Felicia is also looking after and has 'adopted' Janina, one of the children of the peasant janitor who was murdered by Lucian - a respectable and hardworking young woman whom Lucian later seduces and impregnates. Felicia has fetched her brother from prison and tries to enable him to start a new life. In spite of his saintly sister's efforts, Lucian disappears and when he returns commits suicide.

Interesting features of these various characters are as follows: Clara's growing awareness of and repentance for her former immoral behavior in relation to her second husband Calman, both for the fact that she had a lover during her marriage and that the daughter born of the affair is illegitimate (a *mamzer* as defined by Jewish law) and that she would tell Calman not to be honest in business, that is, to be like everyone else. Before leaving for America she asks for Calman's forgiveness and to say Kaddish for her should she predecease him.

Ezriel, one of Calman's sons-in-law, is an interesting portrayal of a tortured soul, torn between his Jewishness and assimilation, his desire to be a Jew and his "stone-cold" skepticism (compare Asa Heshel in *The Family Moskat*). While one admires his intellect, one is shocked at his affair with a woman who has converted from Judaism to Greek Orthodoxy while at the same time his wife, Shaindel, is giving birth to a son, and how he resents having to arrange and attend his own son's circumcision. One can, on the other hand, admire him for regularly visiting Shaindel when she is confined to an asylum, for refusing to divorce her and for the kindness and patience with which he speaks to her when it is obvious that she has lost her reason. In the end he comes full circle, visits the Hasidic Rabbi of Marshinov, leaves his younger son Misha (Moishele) with the Rabbi's wife Tsipele and is determined to visit and even settle in Palestine where his elder son Josiek lives. Note too that he is the only member of the family who visits Miriam Liebe (Count Lucian's wife) when she is poor, ill and destitute and has been rejected by her whole family, especially by her father, and brings her food parcels.

The Polish Count Lucian is a portrait of a disturbed, destructive, probably psychotic personality, playing havoc with people's lives and impregnating women left and right (the servant Kasia, who bears his illegitimate son Bolek, Miriam Liebe's two children, and Janina, daughter of the man whom he murdered - she has to have an

abortion and leave the gymnasium and Felicia's house). He is clearly unbalanced and wrecks the lives of every woman with whom he comes into contact, especially that of Miriam Liebe, who through him is reduced to poverty, isolation, illness, drink and finally death. He is probably Isaac Bashevis Singer's epitome of the sickness and degeneration of the Polish aristocracy in the late 19th Century - his father, too, was unable to run his estate and 'went to the dogs' after his return from Siberia.

Zadok is a puzzle. It is difficult to know why Singer brought him into the book, except to act as a foil to Ezriel - both are sons of rabbis and assimilated Jews, on good terms with one other. However, while Ezriel gradually returns to his Jewish roots, Zadok remains an out-and-out rationalist, secular and assimilated. (His marriage to Hannah, the daughter of a rabbi, is extremely unfortunate and one feels for her, especially on Rosh Hashanah and the High Holy days, although her housekeeping and culinary skills leave much to be desired.) It is only towards the end of the book, on Rosh Hashanah, that Zadok realises what he has lost; he could have been sitting at the right side of his father, the rabbi of Marshinov, esteemed by thousands of Hasidim. Then again, when he goes to visit his dying father, he arrives only a few minutes before his death. Towards the end of the book he becomes aware, too, of the growing antisemitism in Poland, both personally, with regard to his neighbors, and politically, when he realizes that it is stemming not from the ignorant but from the educated classes and from the professors in Germany. In this sense he becomes a mouthpiece for the author. There is a passage starting with his wife, now pregnant, asking him to bring up a bucket of water:

Zadok picked up the bucket and went down to the pump. This fetching of water had become a nuisance. In the few years that Zadok had lived in Warsaw, he had literally seen the growth of anti-Semitism. Gentiles who used to say "good day" and remove their caps had stopped greeting him. Children who had grown up before his eyes had begun to ape and ridicule him. Girls laughed impudently in his face. The Polish press grew daily more malicious, constantly inventing new accusations against the Jews. Even the assimilated Jews were no longer immune to abuse. In Russia, there was no end to the pogroms. Jews were driven out of the villages. The pale of settlement where they were permitted to live grew smaller from year to year. And who was in the vanguard of all this? Not the hoi-polloi or the ignorant, but educated people with university backgrounds. In Germany, anti-Semitism was rampant among the professors. If education was not a remedy against the ancient practice of human repression, then what was? Zadok pumped the water. Around him stood a circle of Polish boys, aping his motions with the handle.

"Hey, Jewboy, that is a pump, not your fringed garment!..." Zadok picked up the pail, spilling the water and wetting his boots.²

Olga, Ezriel's mistress, is a peculiar mixture of good and bad. She is, in fact, a cold fish and one wonders why Ezriel is attracted to her. It might be because she is the exact opposite of his wife, Shaindel: she is neat, polished, well-groomed, accomplished in her work (illustrated when she works for Wallenberg) and her home is likewise neat and tidy (quite unlike Shaindel's). Men like her (after the death of her husband she has two offers of marriage, from Wallenberg and later from the military doctor Lieutenant-Colonel Dr Ivanov) and she is very controlled. She also looks after Ezriel's younger son Misha after Shaindel is committed to the asylum. Her estrangement from Ezriel begins when Wallenberg leaves her money in his will with which she decides to buy an estate in the country. Ezriel puts all his money into the estate and lands up in debt. The breakup point occurs when Olga decides to have an extravagant, very expensive and elaborate ball on the estate and invites all the local gentry - it turns out that the night chosen for the ball is Tisha B' Av. Ezriel does not come. The ball turns out to be a bacchanalia. Ivanov takes control and establishes order; he shows a keen interest in Olga. The next day she goes into a neighboring village to do certain tasks, and expresses contempt and distaste for the Hasidic Jews with whom she does business - this attitude is further exacerbated when she passes a Jewish cemetery in which a funeral is taking place and compares (unfavorably) the Jewish wailing and lamenting and scenes of Jewish women prostrating themselves on the gravestones with the flowers placed on the graves of Christian cemeteries. She equates this with the kind of Judaism to which Ezriel wishes her to return.

The final break comes when Ezriel decides to spend the week of Rosh Hashanah and Simchat Torah with his brother-in-law married to Calman's daughter (Tsipele) the Rabbi of Marshinov, taking Misha with him: he has decided that he wants Misha to grow up as a Jew. Misha (called Moishele by the Hasidim) is so happy with Tsipele, the rabbi's wife (his aunt) and her daughter Zelda that he does not want to return to Warsaw, so Ezriel decides to leave in Marshinov. On his return home he discovers that in the week that he has been away, Olga has received an offer of marriage from Ivanov. This is the end of his relationship with her, although it would have ended anyway with Ezriel's decision to visit and, eventually settle in Palestine.

What finally can be said about this novel - the sequel to *The Manor*? In contrast to the structural tightness of its antecedent, it is a broad, sprawling, occasionally fragmented work. However, at all times it is extremely readable, compelling and convincing: Singer knows his characters inside out, whether it be the morally flawed yet absolutely womanly Clara, the Jewishly conflicted and

spiritually tormented Ezriel, the psychologically sick and depraved Count Lucian and even the ultra-rationalist and anti-Judaic secularist Zadok who, after years of not visiting his father, the saintly Rabbi of Marshinov, arrives at his bedside only minutes before his death.

There are, however, several aspects of the novel that are inexplicable or unsatisfactory. First there is the Miriam Liebe episode, in which Calman Jacoby's daughter runs off with the seductive, but base and degenerate Lucian, marries and has two children by him and is ultimately thoroughly destroyed. Is it plausible that a father as responsible as Calman Jacoby would cut his daughter (and grandchildren) so thoroughly out of his life and so ignore her that she eventually dies a lonely, ill and destitute alcoholic? This is even taking into account how in Eastern Europe at the time, Jewish parents commonly went into mourning - sat *shiva* - when intermarriage occurred.

Then there is Felicia, wife of the brilliant and rationalist Dr Marian Zawacki and sister of Lucian. She is the exact opposite of her brother, the epitome of the good Christian. Yet is it possible, saintly as she is, that she would spend a Saturday night reading a book on Christian martyrs while her atheist husband takes her brother's children to the theatre for a little light entertainment? And after her husband's sudden death, why would such a devout woman attend a séance and then inform Ezriel that she has seen Miriam Liebe's spirit and has a message for him from her? What is the point of this episode, except to inform the reader and remind us, as Ezriel tells Felicia, that he intends to visit and possibly live in Palestine?

A further point: Is it possible that the daughter of a murdered man, Janina, even if she does come from a peasant background, would allow herself to be seduced by her father's murderer (Lucian), have to go through an abortion, be withdrawn from the gymnasium and expelled from Felicia's home, and still weep and wail, after his suicide, that she loved him?

In spite of these reservations, two positive features come into prominence. One is the magnificent description of the death of the saintly Rabbi of Marshinov: no other author with whom I am familiar describes death so beautifully. There is something holy, spiritual about it. The Rabbi is dying: many thoughts go through his mind, but he is upset that he has not had "a vision, a sign from above."³ After several hours he sees a great light:

"And God said, 'Let there be light.' And God saw that it was good." The rabbi was witnessing creation. Within one moment everything had become clear, all questions had been answered. The rabbi closed his eyes, but the light was still there: a radiance that shone neither outside him nor within him, but filled all space, penetrated all being. It was everything together: revelation, surcease from all earthly turmoil, the profoundest joy. 'All is right, God is perfect!' something in

the rabbi cried out. It was all so simple that he could not grasp why he had not known it before. How long had it all lasted? A minute? Seconds? Time itself had vanished. He had merged with eternity. He had only one wish left: to let those who had sunk into doubt and suffering know what he had seen. He stretched out his hand to knock on the wall, but his hand made no sound.⁴ Contrast the above with Clara's death, where there is a sense of busyness, bustling activity, people coming and going: her former husband, Calman, her latest lover/admirer Vinavar, her son Sasha, Sabina (her lover Alexander Zipkin's first wife), her father's young wife Celina all come to say goodbye - her death is very much in this world, whereas the dying and death of the Hasidic Rabbi of Marshinov is purely spiritual. Disappointingly, and surprisingly, there is no description of the death and burial of Calman Jacoby - only of his last illness in hospital: it is almost as if Singer has lost interest in him and shifted the focus elsewhere - to Clara, Ezriel, Zadok - all disbelievers - and to the Marshinov Rabbi at the end.

Finally, *The Manor* and especially *The Estate* cover the entire spectrum of Judaism in late 19th Century Poland, from the shining spirituality of the Hasidic Rabbi of Marshinov to his secular, ultra-rationalist son Zadok; from the spiritually and emotionally conflicted Ezriel, constantly questioning his Jewish identity, to the wretched Miriam Liebe who elopes with and marries a corrupt, disturbed Polish count; from the entrepreneur Calman Jacoby's ambitious materialism and worldliness within the bounds of traditional Judaism (in *The Manor*) to his growing religious rigor, his moral outrage on discovering his second wife Clara's adultery and his ending his last years as a poor orthodox Jew acting as a beadle in the Society of Caring for the Sick in Warsaw. Finally, who can forget the image of little Misha/Moishele, whom Ezriel wrests from the initially nurturing but gradually antisemitic gentile home of his converted mistress Olga, and leaves in the care of the kind and loving wife of the Rabbi of Marshinov, how he happily drinks his milk and eats ginger cake, speaks Yiddish as he had done with his late mother, and recites the simple benedictions learnt in his early childhood?

NOTES

- 1 Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Estate* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 252-3.
- 2 *The Estate* (1970), p.368.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.371.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.373.



SOULMATES: THE STORY OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND HERMAN KALLENBACH

*

David Saks

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – generally referred to by the august title of ‘Mahatma’ (Great Soul) – was unquestionably one of the towering personalities of the last century, not only for the pivotal role he played in the Indian independence movement but as a political philosopher, human rights icon and, if one might put it that way, revolutionary lifestyle guru.

Interestingly, after India itself, South Africa may have the most persuasive claim to him as being one of its own. After all, Gandhi lived in the country for nearly twenty years, and to a considerable extent that experience was a formative one in his becoming the thinker, leader and philosophy that he did. It was in South Africa that he conceived his famous philosophy of non-violent political resistance to colonialism and political oppression – Satyagraha – and adopted the strict asceticism that subsequently governed his own life. The ideas that were nurtured and developed in Natal and the Transvaal, on the kibbutz-like working settlements of Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm and the various premises he occupied in Johannesburg were destined to reverberate around the world.

During Gandhi’s years in South Africa, most of the white Europeans who came to befriend and assist him were Jews. They included his spirited secretary Sonja Schlesin, the journalist and political activist Henry Polak and, above-all, the architect Herman Kallenbach. All were not mere sideline supporters but were intimately involved both in Gandhi’s personal life and in his struggle against anti-Indian discrimination.

Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Herman Kallenbach, by Israeli artist, writer and researcher Shimon Lev is to date the most probing, systematic and scholarly investigation of the Gandhi-Kallenbach relationship. It is further the first to examine that relationship from

Kallenbach’s point of view rather than from a Gandhi-centric perspective. Through it, one recognizes that Kallenbach’s role in Gandhi’s development was more than that of an acolyte and signer of cheques but that, just as his own life was radically transformed by Gandhi’s influence, so was Gandhi himself much affected by their extraordinarily intimate association.

Kallenbach and Gandhi were both in their early thirties and recent immigrants when they first met, probably sometime in 1903, but there the similarities seemingly stopped. Kallenbach was a wealthy, successful architect enjoying the hedonistic lifestyle of the archetypal ‘swinging bachelor’. Gandhi, by contrast, was ‘ascetic, frugal, focused on religion, morality, and truth, a family man who was shortly to take a vow of celibacy, and dedicated to a public mission of social reform’ (p3). Appearances, however, were deceptive. Kallenbach was at bottom a profoundly idealistic man already engaged, through amongst other things his participation in the local Theosophical Society, in a quest for deeper spiritual truths. His friendship with Gandhi really commenced through that Society, where the latter gave a series of lectures on Hinduism. As it developed and deepened, it came to encompass the broader struggle for Indian rights, in which Kallenbach was a devoted participant. With Gandhi no longer able to maintain what had been a successful legal practice because of his political activism, Kallenbach’s financial support became crucial. It was he who purchased what became Tolstoy Farm some twenty kilometer outside Johannesburg, to serve as the headquarters and living base for Gandhi and other *satyagrahas* (passive resisters). Kallenbach himself lived, in the same frugal conditions, on the farm and walked to his offices every day.

The Indian passive resistance campaign culminated in the epic ‘Great March’ on 9 October 1913, when Gandhi led 2000 striking Indian miners from Newcastle to the Transvaal in protest against the legal restrictions on Indians. This was the high point of Kallenbach’s involvement in

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the Passive Resistance struggle. Lev writes: "His organizational and financial abilities, devotion to Gandhi, status as spokesman to the white population and position of leadership in the Indian community gave him a good deal of authority with Gandhi who, as he wrote to his sister, 'did nothing without my advice'" (p85). Kallenbach, Polak and another Jewish campaigner, Gabriel Isaacs, were amongst those arrested for their part in the protest.

Lev describes in detail the day-to-day nature of Gandhi and Kallenbach's life together prior to moving to Tolstoy Farm. They lived together for eighteen months at the Kraal on Pine Street (adjoining today's Pine Street synagogue) and for seven months sharing an isolated tent in Mountain View on Linksfield Ridge. He comments: "Dwelling together in a 'living laboratory' entailed internal examination and constant reflection while maintaining a strict ascetic lifestyle and practicing a highly demanding level of self-discipline, processes during which the two underwent significant mental and spiritual changes". It was here that Gandhi's formative early writings on his *satyagraha* philosophy were composed, and where he and Kallenbach together conceived and gave practical expression to the ideals of "simple living, manual labor, self-sufficiency and non-violence" (p13). Clearly, therefore, the title 'Soulmates' is a well-chosen one.

So close was the Gandhi-Kallenbach friendship, which included living together in the same house and even sharing a room for lengthy periods, and so effusive (from Gandhi's side) the expressions of attachment that it has inevitably given rise to speculation about a possible homosexual relationship. Lev argues that this was most unlikely. Gandhi had adopted what would be a life-long practice of strict celibacy some years before and, as his own correspondence reveals, Kallenbach decided to follow suit. The strictly ascetic lifestyle followed by the two men completely precluded acts of sexual gratification, homosexual or otherwise. Lev is probably correct, though, to suggest that the relationship had its homoerotic aspects.

In light of how minutely every aspect of Gandhi's life has been subject to academic scrutiny, the relative lack of attention paid to his relationship with Kallenbach, in particular those years when they lived alone together, is puzzling. Part of the answer, as Lev explains, is that Gandhi's letters to Kallenbach remained exclusively in the private Kallenbach Archive in Haifa, Israel, until 1994, when they were finally published.

Most of *Soulmates* deals with the South African period of the Gandhi-Kallenbach relationship, roughly spanning a decade from 1903 to mid-1914 when the two embarked together for the United Kingdom. What separated them on their arrival was the outbreak of World War I. As a German national, Kallenbach was interned for the duration, and by the time of his release, Gandhi was much embroiled in the great challenges and complexities of the Indian

independence movement. Kallenbach returned to South Africa, resuming with continued success his architectural practice and second career as a real estate entrepreneur. He and Gandhi continued to correspond, their letters being infrequent but nevertheless expressing a 'mutual longing' (p113) to be reunited. When the two friends next met in May 1937, it was in India, under very different and far less straight-forward circumstances. Here we come to the problematical question of Gandhi's attitude towards Zionism. In public at least, he was unsupportive of the movement, yet at the same time, Lev observes that he never rejected it outright, and at one time seriously considered trying to mediate between Jews and Arabs and encouraged Kallenbach's own involvement in his people's cause (it was on his recommendation that Kallenbach ultimately left the bulk of his fortune to Keren Hayesod, whose South African board he had joined in 1925. Kallenbach's first visit to India was made at the request of future Israeli prime minister Moshe Sharet, who urged him to exert his influence with Gandhi to obtain his, and thereby India's support for the Zionist movement. By this time Kallenbach, increasingly driven by his fear and anguish over the worsening situation of European Jewry, was much involved in Zionist activities. In neither this, nor his subsequent visit in 1939, however, did he achieve much success. Gandhi was by now a world statesman, and probably could not risk alienating India's huge Muslim population by endorsing the Zionist enterprise. Despite this, the evident love and mutual esteem that existed between Kallenbach and Gandhi does not seem to have been diminished, and remained in evidence until the very end. Kallenbach died in 1945, having by then learned that the fate of European Jewry had exceeded his worst fears and without having witnessed the almost simultaneous emergence of the independent states of Israel and India.

Like Helen Suzman, Arthur Chaskalson, Lionel Bernstein and one or two others, Herman Kallenbach merits an especially honored place amongst South African Jews who fought for justice and freedom in their country. A man of deep humanity, integrity and nobility of character, he not only exerted himself to the utmost on behalf of South Africa's oppressed Indian community and later on behalf of his own distressed people, but was instrumental to a considerable extent in the launch onto the world stage of one of history's most remarkable human beings. Up until now, for various reasons, he has been a comparatively neglected figure, even in historical writing dealing solely with the Jewish community. Shimon Lev's fine study should go a long way towards correcting this anomaly.

Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Herman Kallenbach by Shimon Lev, Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2012, 166pp, pictures, index, bibliography.

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: THE GLOBAL BATTLE OVER GOD, TRUTH, AND POWER

*

Gary Selikow

In this seismic work, the redoubtable Melanie Phillips dissects the moral cowardice and perversity of the post-modern leftist elite. Methodically, she reveals the ethical perfidy and intellectual dishonesty of the bastions of their ideology: Environmentalism, anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, Third-Worldism, 'anti-racism', victim culture, moral and cultural relativism, utilitarianism and transnationalism, all of which underpin and define the post-modern left-wing mindset.

In her foreword, Phillips argues that deep division in the West on today's issues is no longer so much 'left' and 'right' but between ordinary people and the intelligentsia. The latter has replaced objectivity with ideology. It today exerts a disproportionate influence within the schools and universities, the media, the increasingly influential NGOs, the justice system, the liberal churches and increasingly governments. The ideas of the sinister Stalinist Antonio Gramsci, the staple diet of the 1960s radicals, have been very successful indeed. It was Gramsci who entrenched the notion that Western civilization could be overthrown by gaining hegemony over the citadels of its culture.

Chapter I looks at the various bizarre conspiracy theories and cults that have infected the minds of modern society. These include Neo-Fascist, Islamist, Green and New Age groups. Insane conspiracy theories include the idea that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were orchestrated by the George W Bush administration and in some versions (particularly popular among Muslims, Neo-Nazis and the anti-Zionist left) aided and abetted by the Israeli Mossad. Phillips also deals with the personality cult around such figures as Princess Diana and Barack Obama, the latter being tied to the suspension in political judgment (Obama, for example, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize for having created a 'new political climate in the world', despite having not achieved any significant move towards peace anywhere).

Chapter Two posits the view that man-made global warming is a hoax, while the next chapter demolishes the myth that President George W Bush and Prime Tony Minister Blair went to war against Saddam Hussein 'based on a lie'. Phillips explains

findings such as those by British intelligence officials in March 2002 revealing that Saddam was continuing towards a lethal biological weapons and chemical weapons program and planned to go nuclear. There is evidence provided by Saddam's former officials that Saddam gave instructions for the WMDs to be hidden in places where no military inspector could hope to find them and that many had been moved to Syria.

Chapter 4 discusses and analyses the deliberate misrepresentation of Israel in the media and by so called 'educators'. Israel has been under genocidal attack for sixty years and the Jews of the Holy Land for thirty years before that but the victimized have been turned into victimizers and vice-versa. Phillips masterfully goes through the history of the Holy Land, showing that there was no nation called the Palestinians and how the majority of Arabs in Israel and the West Bank migrated there after the beginning of the return of the Jews to Zion in the 1890s. Those who oppose double standards against Israel are demonized and made the victims of witch hunts in universities and the media. As Phillips writes, "Perhaps the most mind-twisting example of psychological projection is the claim that the people you victimize are actually victimizing you. Those who are trying to silence Israelis or the Jews who support Israel turn around to claim that any protest against their boycotts or other acts of suppression is a threat to their freedom of speech - even while they dominate the media and their books are regularly displayed in bookshops". We see that hatred of Israel is more prevalent among those higher on the social ladder and with more formal education, itself an indictment of the poisonous culture at the universities and the perversity of the post-modern intellectual elite.

Phillips described the horrific Jew-hatred in the Muslim world and once more points out the hypocrisy of projection: "Israel in particular is the object of frenzied psychological projection. Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan or the putative state of Palestine refuse to have Jews living within their borders; yet Israel is falsely accused of 'ethnic cleansing' and 'apartheid'. The Muslim world tells lies about Jews; but it is Jews who are accused of telling lies about Islam. Nazi style antisemitism pours daily out of the Muslim world; yet that world accuses Zionism of being 'racist'. Iran threatens to wipe Israel off the map yet Israel is accused of 'genocide' against the Palestinians, whose numbers have actually

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multiplied”.

One of the psychological reasons for the hatred of Israel among the left, Phillips maintains, is its hatred of the Old Testament, whose aspects of revenge and punishment that they see as underpinning the Jewish religion are likened to Israeli acts of self-defense. And yet these who say this are the same people who describe the killing of Israeli children by Palestinian terrorists as ‘legitimate resistance to the occupation’. So much for deploring Old Testament vengefulness!

The Neo-Nazi right is also not spared Phillips’ scrutiny. She outlines the alliances far right antisemites have built up with the Islamist as well as the hypocrisy of the left, supposedly the enlightened supporters of feminism and gay rights, who make common cause with Islamist extremists who want to destroy such Western freedoms.

Phillips describes the malaise of Western society, especially in Britain, and how the left elites seek to destroy British culture. I was particularly interested to explore her view of the witch-hunt of anti-racism which has destroyed the lives of so many ordinary people, and the destruction of the family by social workers and government agencies. In one shocking case when a Scottish heroin addict had her young children removed by

the authorities, their grandparents request to adopt them was turned down. Instead, they were placed with a gay male couple, against the wishes of their grandparents, who were told that if they objected they would never see the children again.

While this reviewer concurs with everything Phillips writes about Israel and its enemies, he takes issue with some of her views on socio-economic questions, such as that it is wrong for government to prioritize social welfare assistance to single mothers. In my opinion, regardless of what causes the phenomenon of single motherhood, it is the value we place on life that makes it vital that we help children and the vulnerable. However, there is much to be said for Phillips’ contention that mass Third World immigration into Britain has harmed the indigenous population and undermined Britain’s unique culture.

The World Turned Upside Down is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand the rot and conflict besetting the modern world.

The World Turned Upside Down: The Global Battle over God, Truth, and Power by Melanie Phillips, Encounter Books, 211, 512pp

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READERS' LETTERS

*

I read with great interest the article 'Zionism in District Six and Other Stories of Africa in Israel' by Benji Shulman (Chanukah, 2012) and the point illustrated that there was a time when Zionism was actually seen as a positive thing by many black liberationists. I have in this connection a book on Zionist World War II hero Enzo Sereni entitled *Enzo Sereni, A Hero of our Times*, by Clara Urquart and Ludwig Brent. An interesting thing here is that the foreword, to this Zionist book about a Zionist hero, is written by none of other than Black author and anti-Apartheid activist Ezekiel Mphahlele, in 1967. It was not then considered a contradiction in any way for a black liberationist to endorse a Zionist book and praise a Zionist history.

The fact is that in 1967 the world made a lot more sense. A good deal of the world knew that Zionism was the national liberation movement of the Jewish people and considered Israel to be a force for good. They knew that Israel's cause was a just one, and that those who wanted to destroy it were the true Nazis and Fascists. Today, the truth has been twisted around and we are living in dark and sombre times, not unlike the late 1930s.

On the positive side, it is worth noting that while the South African ANC/SACP regime, while standing united with other tyrants of the world, is doing all it can to declare Israel an enemy, Israel's relationships with many other African countries is growing warmer and more productive. Eight African countries did NOT vote in favour of the criminal resolution in the United Nations in November 2012, in favour of unilateral Palestinian declaration of statehood without first recognizing Israel's right to exist or negotiating with Israel. These were Togo, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Madagascar and Rwanda. In 2004 DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, Cameroon, Togo, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire robustly criticized South African bias against Israel.

As I write, Israel is establishing ties in trade, science, medicine, culture and sport with African countries, to the latter's great benefit. The ANC influenced by strong Muslim influence within and the vile ideas of the SACP and COSATU are clearly not in step with these trends in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Gary Selikow
Johannesburg

Further to the item 'The Amsterdam Jewish Quarter' (Chanukah, 2012), I would like to add a few more places of interest in that city:

- The Askenazi shul, built in 1671, opposite the Portuguese shul. This is not as grand as the Portuguese, but is nevertheless worth a visit.
- The 'Dock Workers' statue, in close proximity to the Portuguese shul. It commemorates the strike by dock and other municipal workers in protest against the Nazi orders to arrest Jews.
- A 'must visit', although not in the Jewish Quarter, is Ann Frank's house.

Shulamit Kagan
Johannesburg



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