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JEWISH AFFAIRS

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JEWISH AFFAIRS

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Editor: David Saks

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THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE; OR, TOWARDS CONTEXTUALIZING THE RAMBAM

*

Jeremy Gordin

Gone too from the world, Averroes and Moses Maimonides, dark men in mien and movement, flashing in their mocking mirrors the obscure soul of the world, a darkness shining in brightness which brightness could not comprehend.

Ulysses, James Joyce, 1922.¹

Rabba before he commenced [his lesson] to the scholars used to say a joking word, and the scholars were amused. After that he sat in awe and began the lesson.

Talmud Bavli (TB), Shabbat 30b.

To attempt to “contextualize” Maimonides via some personal reflections and potted family history is doubtless inappropriate and indulgent, probably plain silly. But I ask the reader to bear with me: not necessarily to suspend willingly his/her disbelief, but rather to trust that, “though this be madness,” yet there is a purpose in it. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi remarked early on in his book on Jewish history and memory: “I trust that, by the time I have done, the personal will not seem merely arbitrary”.²

I began reading about Moses Maimonides, the medieval Torah scholar, philosopher and physician, and trying to understand the philosophical and historical context of his work, in about 2005, when I’d have been 53. This seemed somewhat curious, even to me: at that time, I had for about 30 years been earning my living mostly as a journalist, writing chiefly during the last third of that

period about South African politics. To be sure, my interest in scholarly issues had been re-ignited in the late 1990s, during Classical Culture studies at the University of South Africa³; and, after completing an honours in Classical Culture, I remained registered as a Master’s student for many years, without however producing much, if anything.

Mainly, I suppose, I wanted to appease my *Über-Ich*, hovering in the form of my father: to demonstrate that, despite having squandered my time at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem during my twenties, at least as far as academic achievement was concerned, I could earn higher degrees as easily as others seemed to do. Also, as grandiloquent as it sounds – and indeed is – I have, like John Donne, always been “diverted by the worst voluptuousness, which is an Hydroptique immoderate desire of humane learning and languages”.⁴ Still, for the most part academic studies were something I pursued on the side. While writing, say, an unauthorised biography of Jacob Zuma, which I did in 2008⁵, turning to academic work felt like taking tea with a former *inamorata*; the motive might be duty, remorse or nostalgia, but not passion. Moreover, elements of my intellectual/emotional heritage⁶ did not seem conducive to studying Maimonides. “Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf,” Philip Larkin wrote in “This Be The Verse,” his well-known (notorious?) poem about parents and grandparents.⁷ But they also hand on other things.

From the maternal side, via my Lithuanian-born grandfather, Tsemach (Solomon) Awerbuch (1880-1966), and my mother, Mary/Miriam (Awerbuch) Gordin (1910-2002), I had imbibed or learnt a secular approach coupled with an attitude probably best defined as sceptical – dry, questioning, unemotional⁸ – often ascribed to the traditional *Litvak*⁹. Personally, though, rather than “scepticism,” I prefer the phrase with which Paul Ricoeur labelled Sigmund Freud’s methods: a “hermeneutics of suspicion”.¹⁰

From the paternal side, however, via my grandfather, Latvian-born Fishel Gordin (1869-1951), and my father, Elias Gordin (1911-1989), my heritage was more tinged with *yiddishkeit*. Fishel had received *smichut* and

Jeremy Gordin has worked on many publications, including the Rand Daily Mail, Cape Times, Sunday Express, Financial Mail, The Star, and the Sunday Independent (TSI). From 2004-2008, he was News and Managing Editor of TSI as well as special Group Writer and Acting Editor of the Independent News Network. Gordin has won a number of journalism awards, including the 2007 Mondli Shanduka SA Journalist of the Year Award. He has written three books of poetry and co-authored two books of investigative journalism, The Infernal Tower (1996) and A Long Night’s Damage (1998), and an unauthorized biography of former president Jacob Zuma (2008). He studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Unisa.

journeyed to Johannesburg in about 1905 in response to an invitation from a small *Chabad* community to be its rabbi. But, once he'd arrived, the community had found itself unable or unwilling to pay him, and so he became an egg-merchant, or rather peddler, walking the streets of nascent Johannesburg with a basket of eggs. Or so my father claimed. Given my grandfather's reported disinterest in religion, his apparel and demeanour, as seen by me in photographs (he died before I was born), as well as anecdotes about his and my Grandmother Sarah's laissez-faire attitude towards, for example, *kashrut*,¹¹ it seems highly unlikely that Fishel had been a rabbi. Perhaps my father – a journalist *manqué* – didn't want to let facts spoil a charming story; I leave it there.

Yet it does seem Fishel had attended a (Latvian) *yeshiva*, in his day the equivalent of a higher education in Jewish studies. Among his few possessions when he died were various Hebrew tomes including volumes of his *Shas* (a Hebrew abbreviation for the *Talmud*), hauled with him from Latvia. Moreover, without derogating my father's prodigious autodidacticism and his own experiences and interests, it does seem Fishel had more than a common or garden variety connection with Jewish learning and had found time "to teach his son Torah".¹² From where else came my father's *passion* for acquiring his skills in biblical Hebrew, knowledge of the Bible and Talmud and scholarship relating to these, and extensive knowledge of most aspects of *yiddishkeit*?

It seems also that Fishel – apparently having walked away (for whatever reason) from organized religion and its trappings – might have bequeathed to my father, in tandem with some Jewish learning, bifurcated feelings about Judaism, religion and God, or planted the seeds of such an attitude. But whether he did so is perhaps moot: because my father seemed to have acquired at first hand an ambivalence of his own. In 1946, aged 35, having grown up as the son of impecunious immigrants in Jeppestown, Johannesburg, Elias, a pharmacist, was employed, first in northern Italy and then Paris, as a "Medical Supply and Administrative Officer"¹³ by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, also known as the JDC or Joint. Active since 1914, the Joint¹⁴ was an American Jewish organization which provided relief for Jewish communities around the world. Between 1945 and 1952, it focused its efforts on aiding displaced persons (DPs) who had emerged from the death and concentration camps, providing transportation costs for those trying to get to Israel and informally cooperating with the *Bricha*.¹⁵

While in Europe, my father of course visited the camps and the remains of places such as the Warsaw ghetto (I have his photographs); his charges had recently emerged from them. He said little (at any rate to me, b. 1952) about these experiences. But from what he did say, and from what he said to my mother and siblings, it was evident that he was devastated, "traumatized" we might say now, by what he witnessed. He seemed to me to have been affected in (at least) two, seemingly contradictory, ways. First, he took even more seriously what he considered to be genuine Judaism. Inaccurate understanding or shallow criticism of its history or practices – or using them for nationalistic or fund-raising purposes on behalf of Israel – viscerally irritated him. Yet simultaneously he turned away (even more?) from religious ritual and the idea of a divinity.

I hope I am not exaggerating, but it seemed that going to a synagogue service after what he had seen in Europe made him palpably uncomfortable. Sitting in a *shul* seemed to bring back memories of what he had witnessed, what he'd come to realize had happened to his family, what survivors had told him about their lives and what he had learnt in Europe about pre-holocaust European and east European Jewry; and, somehow, being in a synagogue was for my father (almost physically) incompatible with those memories. My father also evinced scant respect for the learning of local rabbis and for the official representatives of the South African Jewish community, especially the latter's frequent attempts at rationalizing cooperation with the National Party government; shades perhaps of the *Judenräte*.

Yet my father's apprehension when Israel was ostensibly threatened with annihilation by some Arab countries in 1967¹⁶ and his irrepressible exultation when Israeli special forces teams freed Jewish hostages during the 1976 Entebbe airport raid were palpably genuine. He remained incontrovertibly tied to his 'people'. There's an old Ashkenazic song: "*Voss mir zaynen zaynen mir/Ober Yidn zaynen mir...*" ("What we are, we are; but we are Jews"). Jewishness was part of what the French would call my father's *moi profond*.

So: intellectually-speaking I inherited from my parents and grand-parents scepticism or the hermeneutics of suspicion, a purportedly rational rejection of religion, and ambivalent feelings about Judaism. Besides, in 2005, to use the date mentioned above as a convenient baseline, I lived – and still live now, in 2018 – a resolutely secular life. I have scant interest in religious ritual, am not at all prone to spiritual, mystical or religious 'feelings'; and, though I studied, for want of

a better word, and lived in Jerusalem for five years, speak and read modern and ancient Hebrew to some extent, and have family and friends residing there, my attitude to the state of Israel has for political reasons grown increasingly ambivalent.

In 2005 then, and during the years since, it was not inappropriate for my son, friends and acquaintances – and I myself – to wonder why I was bothering with Maimonides. What was the point? Why concern myself with a difficult, orthodox and apparently conservative and austere rabbi who lived in the 12th Century CE?

John Berryman once noted about the Bard: “When Shakespeare wrote, ‘Two loves I have’, reader, he was *not kidding*”.¹⁷ In Howard Jacobson’s novel, *The Finkler Question*, Julian Treslove ruminates as follows:

He dreaded getting so far with Maimonides and then suddenly hitting that blank wall of incomprehension that awaited him at about the same point, even at about the same page, in every work of philosophy he had ever tried to read. It was so lovely, bathing in the lucidities of a thinker’s preliminary thoughts, and then so disheartening when the light faded, the water turned brackish, and he found himself drowning in mangrove and sudd. But this didn’t happen with Maimonides. *With Maimonides he was drowning by the end of the first sentence.*¹⁸

Treslove, reader, was *not kidding* either. Nor is his experience unusual. Maimonides is certainly difficult and his decision in *The Guide of the Perplexed*¹⁹ to be evasive, or ‘esoteric’, as the scholars say, whatever his reasons were, does not make it easier to understand him. Richard Ellmann wrote of James Joyce: “His books are not easy reading. He does not wish to conquer us, but have us conquer him. There are, in other words, no invitations, but the door is ajar”.²⁰ With Maimonides, certainly for the secular, modern reader, the door might not be locked but nor is it ajar; one must find a way to open it oneself.

Exacerbating the situation is that the Talmudic rabbis – and of course the Talmud undergirds Maimonides’ work – were prone to what we would consider to be ambiguities, anachronisms, if not glaring historical and chronological contradictions. Consider the following *Aggadah*:

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rab: When Moses ascended on high [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing *taggin* [crown-like flourishes] to the letters. Moses said:

“Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand?” [i.e., who is preventing You from giving the Torah without these additions/ornaments?] [The Lord] replied: “There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound, upon each tittle, heaps and heaps of laws [deduce other, new laws from every little curve and crown of the letters].” “Lord of the Universe,” said Moses, “permit me to see him.” He replied: “Turn thee round.” // Moses went [into the academy of Rabbi Akiba] and sat down behind eight rows [of Akiba’s disciples]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease [as he thought his Torah knowledge was deficient], but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master “Whence do you know it?” and the latter replied, “It is a law given to Moses at Sinai,” he was comforted (**TB Menachot 29b; interpolations added**).

That the whole of the Law, not only the written (*torah she-bi’ketab*) but also the ‘oral’ (*torah she-be’al peh*), had already been revealed to Moses at Sinai, was (and is) an axiom of rabbinic belief.²¹ (In fact the latter was redacted by *Yehudah Ha’Nasi* at the start of the third century CE.) Nevertheless, were Moses transported to a second-century classroom, he would struggle to understand the legal discussions, especially those led by Rabbi Akiba, *Rosh la-Hakhamim* (“Chief of the Sages”). As Yerushalmi noted, “In the world of Aggadah both propositions can coexist in a meaningful equilibrium without appearing anomalous or illogical.”²²

One friend, living in Israel and cursorily familiar with Maimonides, drew my attention to Maimonides’ remarks, used to explain one of his famous parables, in the *Guide*:

Those who are outside the city [*the parable is about the city and its Ruler*] are all human individuals who have no doctrinal belief ...: such individuals as the furthestmost Turks found in the remote North, the Negroes found in the remote South ... The status of those is like that of irrational animals. To my mind they do not have the rank of men, but have among the beings a rank lower than the rank of man but higher than the rank of apes. For they have the external shape and lineaments of a man and a faculty of discernment that is superior to that of the apes (*Guide III.51.618-9; interpolation added*).

My friend asked why I would want to study “a racist like Maimonides, who refers

to blacks, and Turks for that matter, as apes or almost-apes". Others asked why I did not study someone or something – why not get another degree – in something more pertinent to my life and my ostensible occupation, political journalism²³. My son, now 24 and a master's student in astrophysics, is wont to point out that Aristotle's cosmogony, with which Maimonides might have taken issue but which he used as a "scientific" benchmark, is now completely passé, and, as for Maimonides' views on the divinity ...

So, the question for me was (and is): Why should or would someone such as I – *halakhically* Jewish²⁴ (but *halakhah* is not important to me personally), child of the 20th Century, stepchild of the 1960s' counterculture (notionally, anyway), and thus Western, secular, and essentially a pinko Liberal, for which group it's always a case of "moderation or death"²⁵ – why would I (or others, *mutatis mutandis*, similar to me) want to study Maimonides, an abstruse, irrelevant, possibly "racist," traditional and God-fearing medieval philosopher? Why would a 21st Century person of my ilk be drawn to Maimonides?

In the new preface to David Bakan's *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, one reads that a pivotal piece of evidence confirming the book's thesis resulted from a person called Chaim Bloch having dreamed a dream and consequently deciding to have a – not very felicitous but for Bakan significant²⁶ – meeting with Sigmund Freud, roughly 30 years before he, Bloch, told Bakan about the dream and the meeting²⁷. Similarly, in the tri-partite preface to *Maimonides' Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis* by Bakan, Dan Merkur and David S Weiss, Merkur notes that after Bakan's death, which was prior to completion of this book, he was uncertain

...whether to remain within the scope of David Bakan's notes or to exercise greater license in order to fulfill David's ambitions for the project, and I had a dream one night in which I saw David saying to me, "Keep on going." I counted David's acquired intellect among the angelic intelligences²⁸ and wrote accordingly.²⁹

The significance of dreams and efficacy of dream interpretation have of course been issues of debate from time immemorial; the Bible contains stories of many dreams, dreamers and dream interpreters, notably Joseph in *Genesis* (41:15 *et seq.*); Aristotle wrote two treatises on the subject, "On Dreams," and "On Divination in Sleep";³⁰ some of the rabbis of the Talmud, notably in **TB Berakhot** 55a, also treated dreams and

interpretation at length;³¹ and Maimonides, perhaps with Aristotle's work not too far from his mind, wrote that dreaming is clearly part of the activation of the imaginative faculty and connected to having prophetic powers (*Guide*, II.36.370). Yet is it not peculiar that the authors of purportedly *scholarly* works would use dreams as reference points? I am not certain. But I am going to take Bakan's and Merkur's usage as authorisation for what follows, though it is about neither a dream nor a vision, merely an unexpected memory.

A few months ago, while thinking idly about the physical conditions of Maimonides' life, two disparate quotations came uninvited into my mind. I had read both quotes pretty much contemporaneously before I was 18 and numerous times since then; so what was significant, it seemed to me, was not that I remembered them but that they should come unbidden and at the same time – holding hands, as it were – even though they bore no apparent relationship to each other or to the subject of my rumination. The first is by George Steiner. In "A Kind of Survivor," having described his "self-definition" as a Jew, Steiner continued:

Mine, because I cannot speak for any other Jew. ... [E]ach of us must hammer [his/her self-definition] out for himself. That is the real meaning of Diaspora, of the wide scattering and thinning of belief.³²

Second was Albert Camus' first sentence in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, so well-known it has unfortunately become almost trite: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide".³³ Recalling these a few months ago, I remembered that as a young person, then at the end of my teenage years, brought up in the diaspora but living at the time in Israel, I had been quite seized by the sentence "That is the real meaning of Diaspora, of the wide scattering and thinning of belief". I thought I understood what Steiner meant. By 'belief', I took him to mean unquestioning belief in Jehovah and Jewish ritual; and that the connection between the thinning of this belief and being in the diaspora was that, following the destruction of a centralized place of worship in a 'Jewish' territory – the levelling of the Second Temple and devastation of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans – Jews and Judaism were scattered and thinned and belief became attenuated or at any rate much 'changed' – which of course it had, shifting to what Paul Johnson has termed a "congregationalist faith": "[At Yavneh] the Sanhedrin and the state were buried and in their place a synod of rabbis met ...The rabbi and the synagogue became the normative

institutions of Judaism, which from now on was essentially a congregationalist faith.”³⁴

Still, Steiner is an evocative writer and the passage stayed with me. Regarding Camus’ proposition, I had indeed thought about it, as was probably appropriate for a self-involved adolescent and undergraduate philosophy student inclined to Byronic posturing. Still, I wondered – a few months ago, that is – why my subconscious (or ‘unconscious’ if one is a Freudian) had dredged up Camus in tandem with Steiner some 45 years after my adolescence? (I have not thought about suicide, in a personal context, for at least 35 years.)

James Baldwin once wrote: “Money, it turned out, was exactly like sex, you thought of nothing else if you didn’t have it and thought of other things if you did.”³⁵ To those pressing needs, money and sex, I would add food, poetry and rugby (the last two being personal predilections, admittedly); and must therefore assume that as a young man in Jerusalem there were indeed times, or at least moments, when I apparently had ‘enough’ money, sex, food, poetry and rugby – because I *did* think about other things. (Let me say, first, that what I did *not* think about inordinately was suicide. The linking of Camus with Steiner in my recollection was, I suggest, not about suicide *per se* but a reminder or realisation that philosophy is not necessarily a trivial business and that subtending the apparently passionless words of many philosophers, especially classical and medieval ones, might be an anguish and passion we moderns do not always recognize.)

What I *did* cogitate on as a young person was the issue of God’s existence, where and how the universe originated and, flowing from or running parallel to these, Jewish history and culture, e.g. Steiner’s remarks about self-definition, belief and diaspora. Looking at this last sentence, my concerns then (besides money, sex, etc., or *perhaps including them?*) seem jejune and pretentious. But, *pace* Camus, aren’t questions about God’s existence and the origin of the universe (also) among “the truly serious problems”? Stephen Hawking, the renowned cosmologist, would think so. In the final paragraphs of his 1988 *A Brief History of Time*, he wrote:

Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why*. On the other hand, the people whose business it is to ask *why*, the philosophers, have not been able to keep up with the advance of scientific theories.... // However, if we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle

by everyone, not just a few scientists. *Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.*³⁶

Notwithstanding his later cavalier attitude to this passage and particularly the phrase “the mind of God”,³⁷ as well as his later adamant insistence that he was an atheist, Hawking retained the passage in the 20th anniversary edition of *A Brief History* in 2008; and it is a remarkable passage, not only because of Hawking’s concatenation of philosophers and scientists – his clear recognition of their dual role in inquiring into the origins of the universe³⁸ – but especially, and particularly for the Maimonides’ student, because of Hawking’s linkage of “human reason” and “the mind of God”. In fact this could be an apt précis of Maimonides’ *Guide*: “an inquiry into human reason and the mind of God”.

The point of my unexpected recollection is that *I had been perplexed* in my youth; as perplexed about certain ‘big’ issues as purportedly was Yosef ben Yehuda ibn Simon, the student to whom the *Guide* is addressed by Maimonides. But, as we all know, one is forced to move on with one’s life, earn a living and so on, and, as *Jude the Obscure* bitterly discovers,

... [n]ecessary meditations on the actual, including the mean bread-and-cheese question, dissipated the phantasmal for a while, and compelled Jude to smother high thinkings under immediate needs.³⁹

Yet: like a ghost (the “ghost in the machine”?⁴⁰), always just out of sight, at least until I was in my 50s, a memory of my early perplexity seemed to have lolled unobtrusively in the cellar of my mind, waiting patiently for the house to be opened up to a little *recherche du temps perdu* – for me to confront or revisit those “high thinkings” or “big issues”. The poet Dennis Silk⁴¹ once told me of a well-known Jerusalem kabbalist (or *Mekubal*) who said to Silk, when the latter spoke of a letter he knew had been posted to him but had never arrived: “You will of course receive the letter when it is ordained that you should.”

Perhaps my interest in the origins of the universe and related issues was simply fated (the lovely Yiddish word is *besbert*) to be re-kindled at the time it was, and not before. According to the Talmud, when a person comes before the heavenly tribunal after his death he is asked: “Did you conduct your trade

honestly? Did you designate times for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation [raise a family]? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom or understand one matter from another?" (TB *Shabbat* 31a). Perhaps the ghost in my machine was reminding me that the time had come for trying to understand one matter from another.

But returning to the question asked earlier, why was I drawn to Maimonides? Why not Stephen Hawking or Ludwig Wittgenstein or Plato or one of the myriad of people who promise enlightenment? Besides having re-kindled, during my studies at Unisa in the 1990s, an interest in Aristotle, I had been fascinated for some time by personages whom Hillel Halkin has described as "God-arguers":

[Sholem Aleichem's protagonist] Tevye is a God-arguer: as such he belongs in a long Jewish tradition that starts with Abraham and runs prominently on through Moses, through Job, through the Tannaitic rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (who refused to accept a heaven-backed interpretation of Scripture even though it was supported by divine miracles),⁴² through Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, the saintly Hasidic master who is said to have held a trial at which God was the absentee defendant, accused of having inflicted undeserved suffering on His people. *Other religions may have their folktales about men who debate with and even rebuke God, but only in Jewish tradition, I believe, are such stories taken with high seriousness, the behaviour in question being regarded – provided, of course, that it comes from a spiritually ripe individual – as the highest form of religious service.*⁴³

Those mentioned by Halkin, despite their quarrel with the Almighty, remained believers, though in Job's case it took a great deal of painful, indeed murderous, coercion. Then, however, there are those God-arguers who clearly stepped outside the tradition, who crossed a certain boundary. They can be said to begin with Korah, the son of Izhar (*Numbers* 16), who, in an astounding episode given its context, rebels against Moses and Aaron, accusing Moses, as though he were a trade union secretary-general in modern-day South Africa, of being guilty of "not consulting" and above all setting himself up as a prince. Korah and his followers are thereupon swallowed up by the earth while some are burnt alive. Such God-arguers also included the 'heretic' Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, whom the Talmud suggested was led to apostasy by *inter alia* his study of Greek writings (TB *Hagigah* 15b), something Maimonides was accused of for many years

and of which he is still accused by some.

One text about which my parents debated vigorously, so I was familiar with it from my teenage years, was a lecture delivered by Isaac Deutscher to the World Jewish Congress in 1958 and published posthumously in 1968 as an essay, "The Non-Jewish Jew". Deutscher begins the essay by telling the story of the surprisingly close friendship between Elisha Ben Abuya and Rabbi Meir (139-163CE), the latter considered one of the greatest of the *Tannaim*,⁴⁴ precisely for which reason he was not expected to be on good terms (or any sort of terms) with Ben Abuya, mostly portrayed in the Talmud as a dangerous and destructive person. By way of trying to understand this inappropriate relationship, Deutscher wrote, he came to consider Ben Abuya as "the Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry [yet] belongs to a Jewish tradition".⁴⁵ Deutscher saw in him the prototype of a number of Jews, former Jews or converted Jews who had in their own ways tried to change the world.⁴⁶ One of them was Baruch Spinoza, at whom I took "another look" – and discovered Spinoza's 'debt' to Maimonides and other medieval (Jewish) thinkers.⁴⁷ I also found that it was perfectly cogent to draw a connecting line between my admired Aristotle and Maimonides, generally thought of as a paragon of Orthodox Judaism only.

The main philosophic touchstone of Maimonides' *Guide* is Aristotle – to whom Maimonides had been led by his spiritual and intellectual confrères in the world of Islam: Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroës), among others. I learnt too that Maimonides lived in the world of Islam – not entirely happily, but that is a separate issue – and also wrote much of his work in Judeo-Arabic, the language of the Jews in the world of Islam.

Perhaps not everyone would have shared my *frisson* when I made these 'discoveries'. But for me it *was* exciting; and I wasn't in bad company. Ralph Lerner prefaces his essay, "On First Looking into Maimonides' *Guide*," with these lines from John Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" –⁴⁸ "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken".

The *enfant terrible* (and later philosopher) Shlomo Yehoshua, who changed his name to Solomon Maimon, said his discovery of the *Guide for the Perplexed* in about 1775 could only "be compared to a man who, having been long famished suddenly comes upon a well-stocked table and attacks the food with violent greed, even to the point of surfeit".⁴⁹

Maimonides was a *Sephardi* (Spanish or Andalusian) Jew⁵⁰ whose main spoken language was Arabic, living as the equivalent of a *Metici*⁵¹ in the world of Islam. In c.1168

Maimonides settled in *Fustat* (“old” Cairo) and became physician to Saladin’s Vizier, al-Qadi al-Fadil, his family and court. By any measure, even in Fustat, Maimonides studied and wrote in harrowing circumstances, in addition to the intellectual and spiritual pressures under which he considered himself to be. Besides persecution, exile from Andaluc a, ‘forced’ conversion,⁵² and wanderings on the fringes of the Mediterranean, Maimonides’ sole financial support,⁵³ his brother David, drowned between 1169-70 and Maimonides suffered serious depression, as moderns would term it – and as he himself called it;⁵⁴ he was also the leader, *de facto* if not always *de jure*, of a vulnerable minority community.

Maimonides nonetheless wrote or compiled close to 20 Judaic, philosophical and medical works, of which at least four may be considered ‘major’. These included, in Hebrew, a comprehensive code of *all* Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*; a full commentary, in Judeo-Arabic, on the *Mishnah* (*Kitab al-Siraj, Pirush Hamishnayot*); and *Teshuvot*, his collected correspondence and *responsa*, including many public letters – on resurrection, the afterlife, conversion to other faiths, and *Iggereth Teiman*, addressed to the oppressed Jewry of Yemen.

His work rapidly had a crucial, massive – and very divisive – impact on Jewish theology and thought. Isadore Twersky has remarked that the record of his studying, teaching and writing “is simply extraordinary, almost surrealistic”.⁵⁵ And at roughly the age of 53⁵⁶ – well into his middle age (he died aged 66 or 69), despite his apparently withering work load and responsibilities, and, above all, despite a Talmudic prohibition against openly discussing, and certainly against writing about metaphysics (termed “The Account of the Chariot,” *ma’aseh merkabah*) – Maimonides completed a treatise demonstrating that Jewish teachings and “Greek wisdom” were compatible.

In *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Arabic, *Dal lat al-h ’ir n*; Hebrew, *Moreh Nevukhim*), written in Judeo-Arabic, Maimonides demonstrated, though obviously not to everyone’s satisfaction, that the *Tanakh* was by no means inimical to Greek wisdom, provided the scriptures were understood and above all *interpreted* in the correct manner – “if only we [readers] are able ...to access the core [of the *Tanakh*] instead of the rind”.⁵⁷

In the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides wrote:

This treatise is directed at one who has philosophized and has knowledge of the true sciences, but who believes at the same time in the matters pertaining to the Law and is perplexed as to their

meaning because of the uncertain terms and parables [especially in the *Tanakh*] (I. Intro. 10; *interpolation added*).

For Maimonides, “Greek wisdom” (or Philosophy, *Falsafa* in Arabic) is closely equivalent to what used to be called, until roughly the end of the 17th Century, “natural philosophy” or *philosophia naturalis* and is now referred to as Science – the natural, formal and applied sciences, particularly astronomy. But *Falsafa* also included logic, ethics, politics, and metaphysics.

These subjects had been written about by Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the “allwisest stagyrite” (as James Joyce called him), about whom Maimonides commented: “Aristotle’s intellect [represents] the extreme of human intellect, if we [exclude] those who have received divine inspiration”.⁵⁸ However, to use a somewhat time-worn example Maimonides, like William Shakespeare, had “small Latin and less Greek” and in any case, would not, initially at any rate,⁵⁹ have had access to the actual works (in translation) of Aristotle and many other thinkers and Commentators.⁶⁰

Maimonides’ guides to Aristotle and to Greek thinking in general were thus the writings of the Aristotelian-steeped and-aligned philosophers of his milieu as well as commentators on Aristotle, almost all of whom were of course non-Jewish. We also know that the majority of the initial translations of Aristotle and the Commentators used by the philosophers of the Islamic world were made by Syriac-speaking Christians; i.e., the translations, certainly the earliest ones, came, it is fair to say, from a ‘Christian’ milieu.⁶¹

What then do we have here? Maimonides’ *Guide* may be characterized as a node into (and out of) which flowed – although modified, both by circumstances and Maimonides’ own choices – Greek thought, commentaries on Greek thought, the Peripatetic School of Arab philosophy, and translations made by Syriac-speaking Christians. It simultaneously became the node or hub of an array of languages: Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and (later) Latin. Maimonides’ intellectual connection with thinkers from different cultures and times represents what I term an *ecumenical tableau* – ‘ecumenical’ in the sense of ‘all-inclusive’, and ‘non-sectarian’.

In studying the thought of Maimonides and the thinkers with whom he was connected, both before and after his life, one observes an intellectual chain, reaching across time and place, conjoining Greek, Arabic, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian thinkers, and many languages. The first and last stanzas of Philip Larkin’s short 1954 poem, ‘Water’, come to mind:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.⁶²

The linkages of thought and philosophy rise above the different languages, physical distances, ethnicities, and faiths – and reach a *locus* where, if you will, any-angled light may congregate. As George Steiner wrote:

Islam, Judaism and Catholic Christianity not only meet ...: they interweave. For ...Maimonides reads in the light of Avicenna, and Thomas Aquinas, in turn, reads via Maimonides' reading of his Arab predecessors.⁶³

And Edward Said has remarked:

"[A]ll cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic".⁶⁴ To study Maimonides – aware of the sources from which he drank,⁶⁵ the way in which he drew from them, and the influence that his use of them in turn exercised – is to have the opportunity to see an ecumenical tableau whose riches are neither single nor pure but remarkably hybrid, heterogeneous, and unmonolithic.

In other words, though the heart quails at using such a buzzword, Maimonides is a remarkable case study in *multiculturalism*: a moving example of human intellectual *toenadering*, notwithstanding all the barriers that humans feel constrained to construct between each other. And this is only one of the gifts that studying Maimonides offers.

Isn't it a good enough reason to feel drawn to the *fatylasuf* from Fustat?

NOTES

- 1 Joyce, James 2000 (1922). *Ulysses*. London: Penguin Classics annotated student edition, p34.
- 2 Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim 1982. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, p6.
- 3 In particular by Dr Sira Dambe and Professor Johan Strijdom.
- 4 John Donne, letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, September 1608. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M Coffin, 1952. New York: The Modern Library, p375.
- 5 Gordin, Jeremy 2008. *Zuma: a Biography*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- 6 Cf. Gordin, Jeremy 1998. *Pomegranates for My Son*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- 7 Larkin, Philip, 1989, *Collected Poems*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, p180.
- 8 If we define *authenticity* "as the degree to which an individual's actions, approach or apparent feelings are congruent with his or her *true* beliefs, desires and emotions" – I do sometimes wonder how *authentic* were and are my maternal grandfather's, mother's and my professed "dry, questioning, unemotional" approach. Or was (and is) this just a veneer or adopted *persona*? But this question is, luckily, beyond the ambit of this essay.
- 9 My mother, aged about 10, once came home excitedly from school and asked her father rhetorically: "Daddy, do you know the sun is 93 million miles from the earth?" He looked at her and replied: "Ninety-three million miles? Ninety-three million miles? Tell me, do you know how long *one mile* is? Ten miles? Fifteen miles? Have you ever walked 15 miles? So how do you know what 93 million miles are?" (Tsemach had started his working life aged about 16, as a smous in the Cape; presumably he had walked a mile or two in his time.) Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithuanian_Jews#Culture; *emphasis added*): Following the dispute between the *Hasidim* and the *Misnagdim* ["Opponents" of Hasidism] in which the Lithuanian academies were the heartland of opposition to Hasidism, "Lithuanian" came to have the connotation of *Misnagdic* (non-Hasidic) Judaism generally.... The characteristically "Lithuanian" approach to Judaism was marked by a concentration on highly intellectual Talmud study... *Litvaks were considered to be more intellectual and stoic than their rivals, the Galitzianers, who thought of them as cold fish*.
- 10 Ricoeur uses this phrase on pp. 32 ff. of his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970), trans. D Savage, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 11 A story my mother told me: During the early days of her marriage, wanting to prove some point during a debate or perhaps just wanting to hit back at my father for some reason, my mother said to her mother-in-law (my grandmother, Sarah): "And do you know, by the way, that your son happily ate leg-of-lamb last Sunday?" Leg-of-lamb (unless specially tended to) is not *kosher*. Sarah thought for a while and then replied: "I'm sure that if Elias ate it, it was kosher" – a response Maimonides might have envied.
- 12 *Deuteronomy* 11: 18-19 is clear:
18 Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.
19 And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.
- 13 http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Count/NY_AR45-54_00027/NY_AR45-54_00027_00263.pdf
- 14 <http://yivoarchives.org/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=33169>
- 15 Bricha: ("escape" or "flight") was the underground organized effort that helped Jewish Holocaust survivors escape post-World War II Europe to Mandatory Palestine in violation of the White Paper of 1939. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bricha>

- 16 The jury of historians seems now still to be out on whether ‘annihilation’ was ever really a probability, but this is beside the point; to my father, and most people at the time, it seemed a reality.
- 17 Berryman, John 1976. *The Freedom of the Poet*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. P. 316.
- 18 Jacobson, Howard 2010. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury. P. 196; *emphasis added*.
- 19 *Guide*: Maimonides, Moses/Moshe ben Maimon /Mūsā ibn Maymūn 1963. *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Arabic *Dalālat al-hāirīn*; Hebrew *Moreh Nevukhim*), vols. I and II. Trans., introd. Shlomo Pines; introductory essay by Leo Strauss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (UCP). Roman numerals refer to (original) Part (as indicated by Maimonides), Arabic numbers refer to (original) Chapter; and page numbers refer to Pines’ translation: e.g. III: 20:231.
- 20 Ellmann, Richard 1982 (1959; new & Rev.). *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford University Press, p6.
- 21 *Palestinian Talmud*, *Peah* 17:1: “All that a mature disciple will yet expound before his master has already been told to Moses at Sinai.”
- 22 Yerushalmi, *ibid*, 18.
- 23 Perhaps it’s mainly specialists and scholars only who pay attention to a contention such as Howard Kreisel’s: “The purpose of most of Maimonides’ literary activity *must be understood from a political perspective* ...teaching Mosaic law as the ideal expression of political philosophy” Kreisel: 1999: 267; *emphasis added*).
- 24 *Halakhah* is the collective body of Jewish religious laws derived from the Written and Oral Torah and including the 613 mitzvot (‘commandments’), subsequent Talmudic and rabbinic law and the customs and traditions compiled in the *Shulchan Aruch* (literally “Prepared Table”, but more commonly known as the “Code of Jewish Law”). In terms of halakhah, the child of a (halakhically) Jewish woman is *ipso facto* Jewish.
- 25 Hitchens, Christopher 2000 (1998). “Goodbye to Berlin” [“Moderation or Death”], 138-164, in *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*. London: Verso. p151.
- 26 Bloch dreamed he should meet Freud; they did meet but came to verbal blows because Bloch reacted with horror to Freud’s mss., or perhaps an early copy, of *Moses and Monotheism*; Freud left the room angrily; Bloch therefore had a look at Freud’s bookshelves, and saw certain books – which apparently went missing from Freud’s library later, when it was transported to England – that confirmed, according to Bakan, Freud’s interest in, or at least familiarity with, Jewish mysticism.
- 27 Bakan, David 2004 (1958). *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*. Dover Publications. Electronic book (EB): loc. 153-71.
- 28 Re “acquired intellect” and “angelic intelligences” in relation to Maimonides’ work and that of other medieval philosophers: in medieval astronomy the universe was divided into a series of spheres each contained within the other. Each sphere was supposed to be governed by an intellect in the same way that a human body is governed by its soul. The intellect of the lowest or most central sphere, the one that contains the planet Earth, was called the “Active Intellect”. Cf. Samuelson, Norbert M 1984. “Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” 260-303, in Holtz, Barry W (ed.) 1984. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. New York: Summit Books.
- 29 Bakan, David, Merkur, Dan & Weiss, David S 2009. *Maimonides’ Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis*. Albany: State University of New York System Publishers (SUNY). EB: loc.92-4.
- 30 Aristotle 1995 rev. (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vols. one and two. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Bollingen series LXXI: 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press (PUP). P. v; 729-35; 736-39.
- 31 The rabbis are remarkably entertaining, droll, hopelessly sexist and quite percipient, at least about dream interpreters (psychotherapists?) and payment (!): “Bar Hedyā was an interpreter of dreams. To one who paid him he used to give a favourable interpretation and to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavourable interpretation” (**TB Berakhot** 56a). I recommend reading **TB Berakhot** (55-57a).
- 32 Steiner, George 1967. *Language and Silence*. London: Faber and Faber, p165 (*interpolation added*).
- 33 Camus, Albert 1955. (Trans. Justin O’Brien.) *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Hamish Hamilton, p11.
- 34 Johnson, Paul 1987. *A History of the Jews*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p149. Cf. Ben-Sasson, HH (ed.) 1997 (1969). *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp327-30; Cohen, Shaye JD 2010. *The Significance of Yavneh and Other Essays in Jewish Hellenism*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, pp44-70.
- 35 Baldwin, James 1964. *Nobody Knows My Name*. London: Corgi, pp175-6.
- 36 Hawking, Stephen, 1988, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. New York: Bantam Dell, pp190-1; *last emphasis added*.
- 37 Hawking later remarked, presumably jocularly, that he almost cut the final lines of the book at the galley stage. “In the proof stage I nearly cut the last sentence in the book, which was that we would know the mind of God. Had I done so, the sales might have been halved.” <http://theexplanation.com/stephen-hawking-human-reason-mind-god/>
- 38 It is not without irony that most modern astrophysicists would think of Aristotle’s cosmogony as the unscientific mutterings of a mere “philosopher” whereas Maimonides considered Aristotelian “philosophy” the acme of Science.
- 39 Hardy, Thomas 1959 (1895). *Jude the Obscure*. NY: Dell. p88.
- 40 Gilbert Ryle referred to René Descartes’ mind-body dualism as the “ghost in the machine,” to highlight (what he viewed as) the absurdity of a system in which mental activity carries on in parallel to physical action, but their means of interaction are unknown or, at best, speculative.
- 41 Silk (b. London 1928; died Jerusalem 1998), a Jerusalem poet – an appellation he’d have preferred far more than “English-Israeli” or similar – taught me at the Hebrew University; more importantly for me, he was a friend and also my mentor for many years. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-dennis-silk-1171685.html>
- 42 **TB Bava Metzia** 59a-b.
- 43 Aleichem, Sholem 1987. *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*. Intro. & trans. Hillel Halkin. New York: Schocken, pp. xxiv-v; *emphasis added*.

- 44 Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Meir *Baal Ha-Nes* (Rabbi Meir the miracle maker) lived in the time of the Mishnah. He was considered one of the greatest of the Tannaim of the fourth generation (139-163 CE). His wife Bruriah is one of the few women cited in the Gemara. He is the third most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.
- 45 Deutscher, Isaac, 1968, *The Non-Jewish Jew and other essays*. London: OUP, p26.
- 46 All of them, Deutscher wrote, may be placed “within a Jewish tradition ... [yet] all went beyond the boundaries of Jewry. They all found Jewry too narrow, too archaic, and too constricting. They all looked for ideals and fulfilment beyond it ...” (*Ibid*).
- 47 I had not yet read the work of “giants” such as Harry Austryn Wolfson, to take just one example, and *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Steven Nadler, was not published until 2014.
- 48 Lerner, Ralph 2016. *Naïve Readings: Reveilles Political and Philosophic*. Chicago: UCP. EB: loc. 3218-22.
- 49 Schama, Simon 2017. *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900*. London: The Bodley Head, p276.
- 50 As was, of course, the Hollander Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) – by descent.
- 51 As careful readers, we recall that Aristotle was himself a *Metic* in Athens. The word in Hebrew is *Ger*.
- 52 Until relatively recently, given the paucity of reliable historical evidence, the jury has stayed out on whether Maimonides actually converted to Islam, either willingly (which would be unlikely) or due to coercion (of some kind). Among the major scholars, Salo W Baron acknowledges the evidence that Maimonides converted but says that whether Maimonides indeed converted remains “moot”; Joel L Kraemer, who considered the “evidence” in detail, believes Maimonides converted; Herbert Davidson says “Maimonides’ conversion must be viewed as unproved at best”; Sarah Stroumsa argues that Maimonides “could not have escaped” conversion. Tzvi Langermann, however, in a recent “analysis” of Maimonides’ relationship with ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Baysani al-Askalani, better known as al-Qadi al-Fadil, the *de facto* ruler of Egypt, seems to demonstrate clearly that Maimonides had previously converted (albeit “nominally”).
- 53 Maimonides was vehemently opposed to rabbis/scholars earning a livelihood from Torah. In his commentary on *Avot* (4:5), he writes of the Babylonian *Geonim* (leaders of the academies), criticizing sharply the way they: “... fixed for themselves monetary demands from individuals and communities and caused people to think, in utter foolishness, that it is obligatory and proper that they should help sages and scholars and people studying Torah ... all this is wrong. There is not a single word, either in the Torah or in the sayings of the [Talmudic] sages, to lend credence to it ... for as we look into the sayings of the Talmudic sages, we do not find that they ask people for money, nor did they collect money for the honorable and cherished academies” (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 13: 372b).
- 54 In a letter discovered in the Cairo Geniza, Maimonides wrote: “The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life – worse than anything else – was the demise of the saint, may his memory be blessed, who drowned in the Indian sea, carrying much money belonging to me, him, and to others, and left with me a little daughter and a widow. *On the day I received that terrible news I fell ill and remained in bed for about a year, suffering from a sore boil, fever, and depression, and was almost given up*. About eight years have passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, [and] he was my student” .Goitein, SD 1973. *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p 207 (*emphasis added*).
- 55 Twersky, Isadore 1980. *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (Mishneh Torah). New Haven: Yale University Press, p3.
- 56 There is some dispute about whether Maimonides was born in 1135, 36, 37 or 38 CE, though Ivry declares that it was definitely in 1138. Ivry, Alfred L 2016. *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide*. Chicago: UCP. P. 11.
- 57 Kirsch, Adam 2016. *The People and the Books*. NYC: WW Norton. P. 175.
- 58 Pines, Shlomo 1963. ‘Translator’s Introduction’, lvii-cxxxiv, *The Guide of the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides. Chicago: UCP. lix.
- 59 Cf. Yitzhak Melamed: In his early period Maimonides did not seem to have direct access to the *Nichomachean Ethics*; instead he relied on al-Farabi’s rendering of Aristotle’s claims. ... [M]aimonides gained access to a translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics* probably in the 1160s. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides already cites word for word from the Arabic translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Melamed, Yitzhak 2016. “Spinoza and Some of His Medieval Predecessors on the *Summum Bonum*” (Forthcoming in Nadja German and Yehuda Halper (eds.), *The Pursuit of Happiness in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Thought*.) <https://johnshopkins.academia.edu/YitzhakMelamed>, p10.
- 60 The ancient writers – some Greek, some Christian, and so on – who wrote commentaries on Aristotle and Plato.
- 61 D’Ancona (Costa), Christina 2017 (rev.) “Greek Sources in Arabic and Islamic Philosophy”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/arabic-islamic-greek/>. No pg. nos.
- 62 Larkin, *ibid*, p93.
- 63 Steiner, George 2010 (1996). *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*. London: 1996: Faber & Faber. EB: loc. 5678
- 64 Said, Edward W, 1993, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A Knopf. EB: loc. 381.
- 65 **TB**, *Avot*, 1: 4: “Yossef the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah would say: Let your home be a meeting place for the wise; dust yourself in the soil of their feet, and drink thirstily of their words.”

A BRIEF JOURNEY THROUGH HUNGARIAN JEWISH HISTORY

*

Bernard Katz

Jewish Presence in Ancient Times and the Middle Ages

Jewish settlement in Hungary stretches back to Roman times. Tombstones dating to the 3rd Century indicate that the Jews accompanied the Roman legions when part of what is today Hungary was a province of the Roman Empire. Further archaeological evidence from that time – the “thanksgiving stone” of a synagogue – indicates that Jews lived in organised communities.¹

Thereafter, for centuries very little information is available on Jews living in Hungary until the arrival of the Magyars, a Central Asian people, in the 9th Century. Jewish historical tradition only mentions Jews living in Hungary from the second half of the 11th Century, when Jews from Germany, Bohemia and Moravia settled there.²

The first Hungarian king, Stephen I (c. 970 – 1038), also known as Saint Stephen, is considered to be the founder of the Hungarian state. He converted to Christianity and influenced many of his subjects to follow suit. This, over time, resulted in hardships for non-Christians including Jews. During the Middle Ages, Jewish spiritual life in Hungary was likely poor in comparison to that in the neighbouring countries because of the dispersion of the communities and their small size.³

Hungary was located on the frontier zone between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires between the 15th and 18th Centuries. The Ottoman victory at the Battle of Mohacs in 1526 led to a more than 150 year occupation of Hungary by the Ottomans. The capture of the Magyar garrison at Mohacs in southern Hungary was the Ottomans' final obstacle before Buda, which was later captured.

In the Ottoman-controlled area of Hungary the Jewish status was relatively satisfactory but in the Habsburg controlled areas the period was characterised by increased hostility towards Jews.⁴

In 1686 Austrian troops recaptured Buda, leading to most of Hungary reverting to Habsburg control. In the process of recapturing

Buda, Austrian troops destroyed Jewish property and killed many Jews. Most of the Jews then living in Hungary retreated with the Turkish army. In recent years, archaeologists found the remains of those who perished when a synagogue in which they had sought refuge was burned. The Budapest Rabbinate buried the remains in a common grave at the Central Jewish Cemetery.⁵

After the Habsburg return, Jewish migration to Hungary began, mainly from the northwest, from Moravia (now the Czech Republic) and from the northeast, from Poland. This migration, which began towards the end of the 17th Century, became the foundation of the Hungarian Jewish community of the modern era.

The census of 1735 enumerated 11 600 Jews (the number is understood to have been much larger) of whom the vast majority were not born in Hungary – the majority were from Moravia and a minority from Poland. Thereafter the Jewish population grew at a rapid rate. By 1787 it had increased to about 81 000⁶ and by 1869 it had reached 542 000.⁷

During the reign of Queen Maria Theresa (1740-1780) the situation of the Jews deteriorated. However her son Joseph II (1780-1790) was influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment and matters improved considerably. Joseph II was remembered with such gratitude by Jews that the Jewish quarter in Prague was named Josefov in his memory.

The 19th Century until Emancipation

In terms of their origin, language and culture the Jews of Hungary were divided into three categories: the Jews of the north-west of Austrian and Moravian origin, who spoke German or a western dialect of Yiddish, those of the north-east mostly of Galician (previously Poland) origin who spoke an eastern dialect of Yiddish and those of central Hungary, most of whom spoke Hungarian.⁸

Pressburg (today Bratislava in Slovakia) became the spiritual centre of Orthodox Jews in Hungary and its yeshiva was the most important in central Europe. Hassidism spread in the north-eastern regions (including towns such as Munkacs, Belz and Vizhnitz)

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and did not encounter strong opposition as was the case in Lithuania.

The Haskalah movement made inroads into Hungary from the 1830s and Jewish practice ultimately fell into three categories – Neolog, Orthodox and Status Quo. Neolog became the largest Jewish reformist movement in the world, claiming 60% of Hungary's Jews by World War I. Although Neolog adopted a variety of innovations, some of them quite radical, the rationale for the reforms were traditional and conservative and held to the notion that halachic permissibility was the overriding guideline for innovation.⁹ Status Quo designates those that remained independent of Orthodox and Neolog. German-style extremist Reform made no headway in Hungary.

The period of reform in Hungary in the 1830s and 1840s resulted in improved civil rights for Jews. During the Hungarian independence revolt against Austria in 1848-9, the revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth, to enlist Jewish support for the revolution, attended a synagogue where he asked the Jews for forgiveness for past persecutions. The Jews trusted Kossuth and 20 000 enlisted to his cause.¹⁰ The revolution failed and the Austrians took revenge on the Hungarians, including the Jews who had supported them.

Dual Monarchy until World War I (1867-1914)

A compromise between Austrian and Hungary was, however, soon reached. In 1867 the Dual Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was established whereby the Habsburg Empire was split into two parts and the Magyars, the largest of the non-German races, were granted complete autonomy over their internal affairs.

Soon after the establishment of the Dual Monarchy, Jews were granted full emancipation although it was not until 1895 that the Jewish religion was placed on equal footing with Christianity.

The period after the establishment of the Dual Monarchy until World War I has been described as the Golden Age of Hungarian Jewry. During this period Hungary experienced high levels of economic growth and a major modernisation of the country took place in which Jews played an important if not dominant role. By World War I, 55-60% of merchants were Jewish, the percentage in literature and arts was 26%, journalism 42%, law 45% and medicine 49%.¹¹ In no other country in Europe did Jews have so much control of an economy as in Hungary.¹²

By 1910, the Jewish population had increased to over 910 000, comprising 5% of the population.¹³ Jews assimilated into Hungarian culture to a much larger degree

than elsewhere and even religious ones tended to consider themselves to be Hungarians first.

World War I and afterwards

Jews who served in the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I numbered 275 000.¹⁴ Of these some 10 000 Hungarian Jews died.¹⁵ The precise number of Jewish officers in the Austro-Hungarian army is uncertain but by 1900 (when Jews could not hold a commission in either the Russian or German army) it was probably over 2000 out of 27 000.¹⁶

The Austro-Hungarian Empire allied itself with Germany in World War I and defeat resulted in disastrous consequences for Hungary. The Treaty of Trianon carved up Hungary and parcelled out two-thirds of its territory and three-fifths of its population to its neighbouring countries – Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. This carve up was a national trauma and the dream of reconstituting the historical borders was one of the reasons for Hungary allying itself with Germany in World War II.

After the war a short-lived (four months) communist government led by Bela Kun (born Berele Kohn) came into being. This was overthrown by a nationalistic and antisemitic regime with Admiral Miklos Horthy as its regent. The fact that Kun and many other communists in senior positions had been Jewish (18 of the 29 members of this Communist government were of Jewish heritage)¹⁷ had consequences for the Jews as the communist revolution was perceived as a "Jewish Revolution." The anti-Communist "White Terror" which followed resulted in some 3000 deaths, most of them of Jews.¹⁸

Hungary was the first country to introduce antisemitic laws in 20th Century Europe. The "Numerus Clausus" Act was introduced in 1920, long before the rise of Hitler, and limited the number of Jews at universities to their percentage of the population, namely 6%.¹⁹ Jewish registration at Budapest University dropped from 40% in 1917-1918 to 8% in 1920-1921.²⁰

In 1938 the First Anti-Jewish law was introduced, placing quotas on professional jobs accessible to Jews by capping them at 20% and thereby forcing large numbers of Jews out of the economy. This was followed in 1939 by the Second Anti-Jewish law which reduced the 20% to 6%. It has been estimated that this law forced between 60 000-70 000 Jews out of the economy, which if their families are included affected some 200 000 people.²¹ The Third Anti-Jewish law, adopted in 1941, forbade marriages between Jews and non-Jews.

With German support Hungary reacquired

territories it had lost at the end of World War I – from Czechoslovakia (1938 and 1939 Ruthenia including Munkacs), from Romania (1940 Northern Transylvania including Kolozsvár) and from Yugoslavia (1941). This territorial expansion almost doubled the number of Jews in Hungary.²²

Holocaust period

In December 1940 Jews serving in the army were expelled from their units and stationed in units belonging to “labour battalions.”

The prime minister of Hungary at the outbreak of World War II, Pal Teleki was a vocal antisemite who claimed that in eight or nine cases out of ten he could recognise a Jew. Yet he was so appalled at the German invasion of Yugoslavia that he committed suicide after sending a note to Miklós Horthy, Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary: “We have allied ourselves with scoundrels.”²³

Laszlo Bardossy then became prime minister. He participated in the first deportations of Jews in June 1941 in the belief that this would keep German troops out of Hungary. In March 1942 Horthy appointed the less viciously antisemitic Miklos Kallay as prime minister. Kallay refused to co-operate with deportations, which resulted in increased tensions with Germany and ultimately to German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944. Kallay was sent to Dachau and later Mauthausen – after being liberated he went into exile in America.

The Final Solution of Hungarian Jews and deportations to Auschwitz under the control of Adolf Eichmann began on 15 May 1944 and was jointly organised by Germans and Hungarians. Between 15 May and 9 July, 436 000 Jews from the countryside were deported to Auschwitz²⁴ and the deportations from Budapest were due to commence.

In the meantime Horthy had become increasingly uncomfortable with the deportations. At a cabinet meeting on 26 June, he stated, “I shall not tolerate this any further! I shall not permit the deportations to bring further shame on the Hungarians!”²⁵

In April 1944 two Slovakian Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, escaped from Auschwitz and wrote the “Auschwitz Protocols,” a detailed report about what was going on in the camp. The Protocols only reached Hungary towards the second half of June 1944. Horthy reputedly read the Protocols on 3 July. Although he had not been ignorant as to what was going on he was now convinced that even the most horrifying details were true.²⁶ On 7 July 1944 Horthy put a stop to the deportations. In the face of continued German pressure

to resume them, he executed a coup on 24 August and appointed the anti-Nazi General Gezi Lakatos as his new prime minister. With Eichmann forced to leave Budapest the situation of the Jews in Budapest looked hopeful during July and August but on 15 October Germany urged rebellion against the Hungarian government. Horthy announced over the radio his intention to withdraw Hungary from the war and blamed the Gestapo for dealing with the “Jewish problem” in an inhumane manner. He further called on Hungarian soldiers to resist German attempts at a coup. Horthy’s attempt failed. On 16 October he was arrested, the Nazi supporting Arrow Cross government was installed and a day later Eichmann returned. By then there were no more deportations as by November 1944 the gassing installations at Auschwitz were no longer working.²⁷

Jews possessing *schutzpasse* (safe conduct passes) issued by neutral powers were crowded into the International Ghetto. Officially there were 7800 Swiss, 4500 Swedish, 2500 Vatican, 698 Portuguese and 100 Spanish but the number of legal and forged safe-conducts approached 100 000.²⁸

Of the 825 000 persons considered Jewish in the 1941-1945 period in greater Hungary, about 565 000 died. Of these, 298 000 were from Trianon Hungary and 267 000 from the annexed territories.²⁹

At time of liberation 94 000 Jews survived in the two main ghettos and in the legations of the neutral powers, to which were added 25 000 in hiding plus some 20 000 later returned from concentration camps. About 105 000 Budapest Jews died between 19 March 1944 and the end of the war³⁰ in addition to 15 350 who died during the period preceding the occupation. Hence almost 50% of Budapest’s Jews died during the Holocaust.³¹

Winston Churchill described the murder of Hungarian Jewry as “the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world.”³²

Rudolf Kasztner

In January 1943 a Zionist Rescue Committee was formed in Budapest to help Jews in neighbouring countries. Otto Komoly was president, Rudolf Kasztner vice president and Joel Brand was responsible for the underground rescue from Poland. After Germany occupied Hungary and the deportations began, Brand’s wife Hansi suggested that they try adopt in Hungary the Bratislava model, where lives had been bought with money. On 25 April Eichmann summoned Brand and proposed a deal whereby he was prepared to sell a million Jews for

10 000 trucks. Brand and Kasztner's names – especially Kasztner's – became linked to the transaction which became known as “Blood for Goods.” Brand was sent to Istanbul to negotiate with the Allies but progress was slow and ultimately failed.

In the meantime, Kasztner succeeded in securing a deal with Eichmann which resulted in a transport on 30 June 1944 which became known as Kasztner's train of 1684 Jews from Hungary to Switzerland at a price of \$1000 per person. Those on the train included industrialists, intellectuals, Orthodox rabbis (including the future Satmar Rebbe), Zionists, anti-Zionists and members of Kasztner's family.

Kasztner's actions are contentious. There are those including Anna Porter, a Canadian born in Hungary, who in her book *Kasztner's Train* considers Kasztner a hero of the Holocaust who under extremely difficult conditions saved lives.³³ On the other hand the memory of Kasztner's Train is extremely distressing to those whose family members did not survive. In his recent book *Kasztner's Crime*, British Jewish historian Paul Bogdanor accused Kasztner of collaboration with the Nazis and suppressing knowledge of what was happening at Auschwitz from Hungary's Jews.³⁴

After the war Kasztner moved to Israel where, in 1953, an embittered Hungarian Jew, Malchiel Grunwald distributed a pamphlet accusing him of collaboration. The Israeli government persuaded Kasztner to cooperate in a libel suit brought by the State on his behalf. Judge Halevi ruled against Kasztner, blaming him for not disclosing what was taking place at Auschwitz and for not encouraging resistance and stated that Kasztner “had sold his soul to the devil.”³⁵ On 3 March 1957 Kasztner was murdered and a week later the Supreme Court exonerated him by a four to one decision.

The Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer regards the criticism of Kasztner to be unfair for notwithstanding that he was a very unpleasant person he certainly was not a traitor or a collaborator but wanted to rescue Jews and therefore had no choice but to turn to the Germans. He describes Kasztner as “white with a lot of grey spots.”³⁶

How much did Hungarian Jews know?

Bauer is of the view that knowledge of what was happening in Poland was quite widespread in Hungary, contrary to post-war testimonies suggesting the contrary. He says the Hungarian army was in occupation of areas of Ukraine where Jews were being murdered and used Jews in the labour battalions – 50 000 of whom returned to Hungary in

1943. Furthermore, Hungarian officers and soldiers on leave would have spoken about what they had seen. While they didn't know the details of the concentration camps, they knew that Poland meant death.³⁷

The Hungarian-born Israeli historian Chava Baruch argues that there is a big difference between ‘knowing’, ‘internalising’ and “taking action”, saying that from 1943 her grandfather knew the situation facing the Jews yet stayed home. She adds that the uniqueness of the Hungarian Holocaust was that in 56 days the entire countryside was deported.³⁸

Hungarian collaboration with Germany

Had Germany not invaded Hungary, Hungarian Jewry would have substantially survived but without the enthusiastic support of Hungarian authorities, the Germans would not have been able to complete the deportations in such a short time.³⁹ A proportionately high proportion of Hungarians collaborated with the Germans.⁴⁰

In his book *Christianity and the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry* Moshe Herczl takes a dim view of Hungarian participation in the Holocaust. He writes that the number of Hungarians involved in the deportations numbered many tens of thousands. He quotes approvingly a comment that the Hungarians were the most brutal of European nations in the degree of bestiality and lack of humanity towards the Jews.⁴¹ Herczl also alleges that the delegitimising and dehumanisation of Jews in Hungary had occurred over a sustained period and the silence of the church and anti-Jewish legislation provided fertile conditions for the general population to participate enthusiastically in the deportations.⁴² There was general agreement that the number of Germans involved in the deportations was small in comparison to the enormous operation of deporting hundreds of thousands and that the vital factor in the success of the operation was that the steps against the Jews were found acceptable by most of the Hungarian nation.

Raoul Wallenberg

After the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944, the American War Refugee Board undertook an initiative to finance a rescue mission in Hungary. By then the American government had long known about the genocide. Given that America was a participant in the war and could not involve itself directly it asked neutral Sweden to assist and Raoul Wallenberg was appointed as the Swedish diplomat to undertake this mission.

Ingrid Carlberg, in her recent biography *Raoul Wallenberg*, is of the view that Wallenberg's heroic deed was the huge organisation, employing nearly 350 people that he set up to help Hungarian Jews. This delivered food to tens of thousands of people, ran a hospital and had their own security police. The basis of the organisation was the distribution of Swedish *Schutzpässe* which Wallenberg had designed – a fake passport which saved many lives.⁴³

Carlberg says it is hard to say how many lives Wallenberg saved. She says that in a letter he put the number at 20 000. This would include 15 000 people saved from forced labour due to his intervention with the Arrow Cross, 2000 people saved by his security police patrol and 1000 prevented from going on forced marches. She adds that the mention of his name saved lives. In January 1945 the order was given to destroy the central ghetto in Budapest, where between 70 000 and 100 000 Jews lived. Although Wallenberg was not in Budapest at the time, a companion of his in the Arrow Cross police force who had switched sides told the German general that he had been ordered by Wallenberg to remind him that he would face prosecution for war crimes if he destroyed the ghetto and this caused the German general to back off.⁴⁴

In January 1945 Wallenberg approached the Red Army to suggest a collaborative approach to saving Budapest's Jews and to provide post-war aid. They arrested him, took him to Moscow and imprisoned him in the Lubyanka. The mystery of Wallenberg's fate remains unresolved to this day.⁴⁵ Carlberg believes that Wallenberg's it was probably sealed by Stalin, who was suspicious that the United States was trying to make a separate peace with Germany and thought that Wallenberg could be linked to those negotiations. The Soviets were also highly suspicious of Wallenberg's contacts with the Arrow Cross and Nazis.⁴⁶ Yehuda Bauer suggests that to the Soviets "the moral imperatives of a wealthy banker to endanger his life in order to save some Jews must have seemed incomprehensible and suspicious."⁴⁷

The official Russian answer to this day is that Wallenberg died of natural causes on 17 July 1947.⁴⁸

Carl Bildt the former Swedish foreign minister is of the view that most likely Wallenberg was executed but the reason is unclear.⁴⁹

Current Jewish community

Communist rule from 1949 led to the closure of many Jewish institutions and restrictions on Jewish activities. The Jewish population

of Hungary today is estimated at between 35 000-120 000,⁵⁰ mostly unaffiliated and 80% of whom live in Budapest. Half the community are estimated to be older than 65 and intermarriage rates are estimated to be over 60%.⁵¹

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Hungary in July 2017. The visit highlighted tensions between his government and the local Jewish community who were unhappy with Netanyahu regarding two recent controversies where they felt that Netanyahu had 'deserted' them. The first concerned Hungarian Prime Minister Orban's reference to Miklós Horthy (who the local community feel was complicit with the Nazis) as an "exceptional statesman" and the second concerned a poster campaign launched by the Hungarian government targeting George Soros accusing him of seeking to flood the country with immigrants (which was believed to evoke antisemitic undertones). Speaking in Netanyahu's presence Orban said with reference to the Holocaust that "the Government of Hungary ... committed a sin when it did not protect [its] Jewish citizens ..." and promised a "zero tolerance" to antisemitism. Orban also referred to the renaissance of local Jewish life, saying "this is something that we are proud of..."⁵²

Noteworthy Jews

Jews made significant contributions to Hungarian culture, science business and sports. These included Leo Szilard and Edward Teller (atom bomb), John von Neumann (computers), Arthur Koestler, George Soros, Andy Grove, Joseph Pulitzer, Ephraim Kishon, Harry Houdini and Tony Curtis.

Between 1908 and 1968 Jewish Hungarians won 80 medals at the Olympic Games predominately in fencing, swimming, water polo, gymnastics and wrestling. Agnes Keleti won 11 medals (including five gold) making her one of the greatest gymnasts in history.

Places of Jewish Interest

Budapest was considered a backwater until it was officially formed in 1873 shortly after the establishment of the Dual Monarchy from the towns Buda, Pest and Obuda. Jews played a major role in the creation and development of Budapest (the jibe Judapest used by the antisemitic mayor of Vienna Karl Lueger attests to this).

During the 150 years of Ottoman occupation the Jews were heavily taxed but nevertheless their population continued to increase. After the Habsburgs regained control over Buda, Maria Theresa expelled the Jews in 1746 but in 1783 Joseph II allowed them to return.

In 1815 there were only 1754 Jews living in Budapest but by 1850 this had increased to 70 000 and by 1910 to over 200 000, comprising around 23% of the population.⁵³

The Dohany Synagogue, recently renovated by the Hungarian government at a cost of \$8 million,⁵⁴ dominates the Jewish Quarter on the Pest side of the Danube and is located on a large complex of Jewish sites. Built in the Moorish style, it is one of the most beautiful synagogues in the world and, seating 3000, it is the largest synagogue in Europe and reputedly the second largest in the world. It was built in only four years and was consecrated in 1859. It has since been the most iconic symbol of Hungarian Jewry, testifying to the importance and cultural ambitions of the Jews of Budapest at the time it was built. The congregation is Neolog and Franz Liszt once played on the synagogue's organ.

The Jewish Museum is located adjacent to the synagogue on the site where Theodor Herzl was born and this is commemorated with a plaque. Amongst the many interesting exhibits is a Jewish tombstone with a picture of a menorah etched on it dating to the 3rd Century from the town of Esztergom and Seder plates made by Herend Porcelain, founded by Mor Fischer, a Jew, in 1839.

The garden next to the Dohany Synagogue contains a cemetery which is said to be only one of three cemeteries to be found on a synagogue property in Europe (the other two being Prague and Krakow). After the liberation of the ghetto area on 18 January

1945, 2281 victims of the Arrow Cross were buried here in 24 mass graves.⁵⁵

The Holocaust Memorial Tree is in the form of a Weeping Willow tree cast in steel and comprises 6000 leaves on which the names of remembered victims have been engraved. A plaque says the memorial is dedicated to the 600 000 Hungarian Jews who lost their life in the Holocaust. Tony Curtis, the American actor of Hungarian descent, contributed to its construction.

A memorial chapel known as the Heroes Synagogue is dedicated to the 10 000 Hungarian Jewish soldiers killed during World War I.

Two further memorials can be found on the complex. One honours Hannah Szenes (1921-1944) who grew up in Budapest but moved to Palestine. She was parachuted into Hungary to locate downed Allied pilots and to help save Jewish lives but was captured, tortured and executed by the Nazis. She also became famous for the poetry she wrote. The second memorial honours Raoul Wallenberg.

Around the corner from the Dohany synagogue is a memorial to Carl Lutz, a Swiss diplomat, who saved thousands of Jewish lives by issuing Jews with Swiss identity documentation.

In close proximity is the Kazinczy synagogue (Orthodox) which was used as a stable during the war and restored using its original pieces.

Along the banks of the Danube, on the Pest side of the city, is a monument to the Jews who were murdered by the Arrow Cross



"Shoes on the Danube" monument, Budapest.

along the banks of that river. The monument “Shoes on the Danube” consists of 60 pairs of shoes made of bronze, recalling how the victims were made to leave their shoes along the shore before being shot into the Danube.

In central Budapest on Liberty Square a monument termed “Occupation Monument” portrays Hungary as the victim of Germany during World War II. After its erection public protests against this depiction of history were ignited. A note titled, “Civilians Protest Against Monument Falsifying History” has been pinned to the front of the monument and explicitly states that Hungary was an ally of Germany during the war and that the message suggested by this monument is an attempt to rewrite history. Many citizens have brought personal family memorabilia and placed it at the foot of the monument – e.g. photos of relatives murdered during the war. At first the government removed the memorabilia but the protesters replaced these with new memorabilia. Eventually the government let it be.

A plaque at 8 Vaci Street in downtown Budapest reads: “Dr. Rezso Kasztner 1906-1957/During the Holocaust, as a member/Of the Budapest Rescue Committee, he risked his/Own life to save the lives of many others.”

Organised Jewish communal life on the Buda side of the Danube is less well known but dates back to the 13th Century⁵⁶ when the first Jewish quarter was founded. A *mikvah* dating to this time can be inspected. The synagogue from this time was found in 2005 when some pipes in the road were being repaired but is under a busy road. In 1420 the Jews had to move to a new area as the royal palace was being expanded. The site of this synagogue is known and it is hoped that one day it will be excavated.⁵⁷

Szeged considered itself the capital of Neolog Judaism. Its New Synagogue, seating over 1000, is the second largest in Hungary and is considered by many to be amongst the most beautiful in the world. From a distance its magnificence can already be appreciated. On the arch in its interior are inscribed the words in Hebrew and Hungarian, “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” This synagogue, inaugurated in 1903, is in the Secessionist style, with a 48 metre dome representing the night sky, constructed from deep blue stained glass and dotted with stars. The tabernacle is made from Jerusalem marble and covered with gold leaf.

Unfortunately, these days the synagogue is only used for services on the High Holidays. Before the war about 6000 Jews lived in Szeged – the names of over 3000 of those murdered are memorialised on the walls at the synagogue entrance – but today only about 400 remain.⁵⁸

The **Tokaj** wine region produces one of the world’s great dessert wines and in times past Jews were involved in this industry. The town of **Mad** is the home of the Royal Tokaji Wine Company where plaques were erected which read:

This was the home of Miklos and Blanka Zimmermann and their two children. Miklos was engaged in the cultivation, production, and marketing of Tokaji wines, like generations of his family before him, dating from the early 1800s. In May 1944, the family was deported to Auschwitz along with other Jewish families of Mad. Blanka died in Auschwitz on October 16, 1944.”⁵⁹

A few houses away is a restored synagogue which was originally built in 1795 but destroyed after the Holocaust. Today no Jews live in Mad so it serves as a memorial and museum. During World War II, 800 Jews from the village were deported to Auschwitz.⁶⁰

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CELLINI
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SOUTH MANCHESTER JEWRY

*

David Ariel Sher

"I would like to live in Manchester, England," Mark Twain once declared, "The transition between Manchester and death would be unnoticeable." Walking through the Manchester Art Gallery on Mosley St., viewing magnificently funereal Mancunian scenes like Adolph Valette's sepulchral *York Street leading to Charles Street*, or the enigmatic, mist-filled *Under Windsor Bridge on the Irwell*, one can (northern braggadocio notwithstanding) begin to appreciate Twain's sentiment.

Yet on splendidly sunny days, walking along Hale Barns' Broadway, with light scintillatingly scattered amidst the tree-lined boulevards, one begins to appreciate what our Island's most famous bard meant when he described "this sceptered isle...this other Eden, demi-paradise...This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (Richard II). Evidently, Twain had not strode through the undulating vales of what is now south Manchester. For our South African readers, it may be helpful to note that some Jewish enclaves in north Manchester are considered to have an almost *shtetl*-like character, whilst south Manchester boasts several affluent neighborhoods loosely akin to Johannesburg's Houghton or Sandton.

"Do you like south Manchester?" I once inquired politely from a guest over a *Shabbat* lunch. "I do *indeed*" responded my visitor "I feel in fact that one must almost obtain a *passport* to travel between north and south Manchester." I include this preamble to this brief sketch of south Manchester Jewry's history as it was sentiment like this that undoubtedly enticed our brethren southwards from the eventually less genteel north. Yet their journey is not generally appreciated and I shall attempt to provide a brief background of their movement.

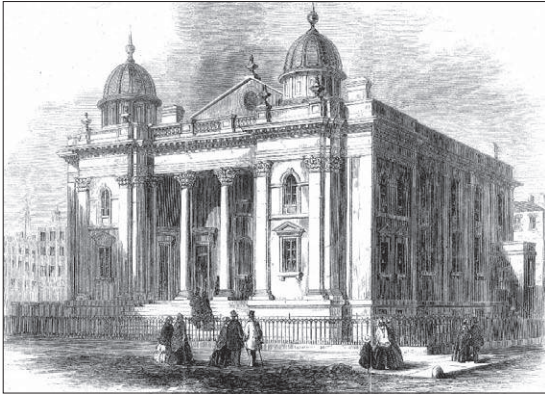
Manchester Jewry before the southward migration

The oldest gravestone extant in the earliest Jewish graveyard in Manchester registers the death of one 'Rabbi Isaac the son of

Yekusiel', who was laid to rest on Sunday 9 October 1795 at the Brindle Heath cemetery in Pendleton. Jews had been encouraged to settle in the town several decades earlier (a passage titled 'Synagogue Alley', running off Manchester's main thoroughfare, Deansgate, appeared in 1741). Many German Jews (including Nathan Mayer Rothschild) arrived, encouraged by the emergence of a veritable 'cottonopolis', and by the 1830s they had prospered sufficiently to open emporia at such prestigious central Manchester addresses as St Ann's Square and Market Street. A kosher restaurant existed in Manchester as early as 1819. Although at this stage Jews had already commenced the exodus from the by now unsanitary city centre, moving to the then desirable Cheetham Hill, others had moved their residences southwards, to areas including Victoria Park, All Saints and Chorlton-on-Medlock.

The community's house of worship, initially situated in warehouse spare rooms, was in 1806 transferred from Garden Street to a refurbished warehouse at Ainsworth's Court. Thereafter, in 1824, it moved to a respectable, custom-designed structure, which included a community school, in Halliwell Street. A short-lived secession from the congregation ended in reunion when the Hungarian Dr. Solomon Schiller-Szinessy was appointed as minister in 1851. However, matters came to a head as Manchester's Town Council announced the construction of a major artery to the city centre (Corporation Street) which would involve the unavoidable sale and demolition of the Halliwell Street Synagogue. A schism in the synagogue between those who favoured reforms to Judaism (these included Schiller-Szinessy) and those who wished to maintain the Oral Law in all its authenticity resulted in the money from the *shul*'s sale being divided. The reformists opened a shrine in Park Place, Cheetham, in 1858 (it was later destroyed in the Blitz) and the Orthodox opened an imposing structure, designed by Thomas Bird in the neo-Classical, Italianate style in the same year (this Grade II synagogue was scandalously demolished in 1981). The services inside this ornate sanctum (which the immigrants titled the '*Englischer Shul*') were marked by decorum and choral and cantorial excellence (especially notable was Cantor Harris Newman). Its exterior featured a flight of stairs 40 feet long which met a

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The Great Synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road, Manchester, opened 1858. Grade II listed.

covered loggia with Corinthian columns and a Tuscan balustrade with cupolas surmounting both of the frontage's extremities. The interior featured a magnificent pulpit and Ark doors carved of Spanish mahogany and gilt chandeliers.

Meanwhile, amongst the Sephardim, worship had been conducted at the former Jews' School. On 6 May 1874 they moved into a new structure, called the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, designed in the Moorish style on Cheetham Hill Road. The new synagogue followed the rite adopted at London's Bevis Marks and adhered to guidelines set by the Sephardi *Haham* in the capital.

South Manchester Synagogue

Those Jews not desirous of remaining in Cheetham Hill also moved into All Saints, a residential area adjacent to Oxford Road that was intended to be a northern equivalent of such affluent locales as London's Mayfair. Allegedly, this caused inconvenience as worship in the Great Synagogue involved a 30-minute walk and so it was that in 1872 the middle-class Anglo-Jewish residents of this suburb - which included some *Sephardim* - convened a Jewish New Year service at the Chorlton Town Hall. It has been said that encouraging the move southwards were the growing numbers of Eastern European Jews who had moved into Cheetham Hill and Red Bank after arriving at Victoria Station via the Transpennine Railway. A three-floor former orphanage and billiard hall on Sidney Street was converted into a galleried synagogue with pew-space for 100 men and 60 women. Despite protest by the parent congregation, Chief Rabbi N M Adler consecrated the new synagogue on 17 September 1873 and a banquet followed at the Hulme Town Hall. Bill Williams judged it to be "a synagogue based on snobbery" and this no doubt was

the view of the Great Synagogue's wardens, who complained of Jews passing the front of the Great Synagogue on Saturdays on their way to the 'more conveniently situated' synagogue in south Manchester.

In 1907, an effort commenced to build a more capacious synagogue on a more fitting site. One forceful proponent of this move was Dr. J P Dreyfus, who presented Chaim Weizmann to Lord Arthur Balfour, and in whose Clayton Aniline Company Weizmann's research proved indispensable to the British war-effort. (The son of the *shul's* rabbi was also a great supporter of Weizmann.) A location in Rusholme, close to members residing in Victoria Park was considered but the congregation decided in favour of the alternative site on Wilbraham Road in Fallowfield; this was to be the abode for the congregation for the next 90 years. The architect Joseph Sunlight (formerly Schimschlavitch) undertook the construction of this stately building using innovative technology including reinforced concrete. The Byzantine-style synagogue, which seated 300 men and 100 women in the ladies' gallery, featured a dome and a 65ft minaret (based on that of Westminster Cathedral) and was modelled upon the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It was later designated with Grade II status by English Heritage. Stained-glass windows lit the interior and donations for these were received from as far as Grahamstown, South Africa. The synagogue's foundation stone was laid in 1913 in a sea of top-hat clad gentlemen and was consecrated by Chief Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz on 20 October of that year. The synagogue rite accorded with that of London's United Synagogues and the wardens wore morning dress, whilst the clergy wore canonicals. The *shul* was also liberal for its time, introducing women to the synagogue executive in 1921 and formally celebrating a *bat mitzvah* in 1929. With growing numbers of refugees, the synagogue underwent an extension to the ladies' gallery. However, by the late 1980s, the slow attrition of declining membership meant that the congregation struggled with the upkeep of the building, which in November 2001 was transformed by the munificence of a public-spirited benefactor into the George Elias Jewish Students Centre. A new modern, if less imposing synagogue was constructed and was opened by HRH, Charles, Prince of Wales on 28 April 2003; it is the only synagogue to have been opened by a member of the British Royal family.

Sephardim in South Manchester

The Sephardi community also established a permanent place on the south Manchester



Wilbraham Road Synagogue in Fallowfield, now the George Elias Student Centre.

cottonocracy scene and purchased mansions along Palatine Road (nicknamed 'Palestine Road') at the end of the 19th Century. They converted Mosley Lodge on Mauldeth Road, Withington, into a synagogue (Sha'are Rahamim) in 1904. This was known as the Withington Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews. A second Sephardic synagogue known as the West Didsbury New Synagogue was established at 119 Palatine Road in 1917. In 1927 both congregations amalgamated and moved to magnificent new premises on Queenston Road. These were designed by London's Delissa Joseph in the classical monumental style, with a red-brick and Portland stone facade. The interior features unrestrained use of white marble and colossal Ionic columns on red Wilton carpet, with the columns reminiscent of that at Amsterdam's *Esnoga*. Meanwhile, in 1925, those Sephardim who originated from Iraq and Syria formed their own synagogue, Sha'are Sedek, on Old Lansdowne Road. The two congregations amalgamated in 1997 to form Sha'are Hayim Sephardi Congregation of South Manchester, under Rabbi Shlomo Ellituv. Both the South Manchester Synagogue and the Sha'are Sedek used a section of the Southern Cemetery on Barlow Moor Rd in Didsbury, with its Gothic *ohel* and chequered floors. The earlier Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue used the Urmston Jewish Cemetery (shared with the New Synagogue) which has highly unusual memorials including a Taj Mahal mausoleum for one Haym M. Levy. After the sale of Sha'are Sedek, a new Sephardi synagogue was constructed on Wicker Lane in Hale Barns. It was opened by Rabbi Joseph Dweck and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis on 29 January 2017. The

ornamental gates, stained-glass windows, candelabras and other appurtenances from Sha'are Sedek were installed in the new synagogue.

The birth of the **Hale & District Hebrew Congregation** occurred in 1976 when a group of Jews decided to open a Jewish house of worship in their salubrious semi-rural suburb. Services commenced on 6 November of that year in a flat on Delahays Road, with a Scroll of Law lent to the fledgling community by the Stenecourt Great, New and Central Synagogue. From these humble beginnings, the *shul* moved to the Bowdon Jubilee Rooms until a site was purchased on Shay Lane in Hale Barns in April 1978. Rabbi E S Rabinowitz served as a part-time minister until Reverend Leonard Tann became full-time minister in 1981. In 1987 Rabbi Joel Neal Portnoy headed the ministry at the synagogue and oversaw a building scheme. In 2003, this culminated in the opening of the new synagogue whose *mizrach* (eastern) wall featured some 7 ½ tons of Jerusalem stone and whose foyer features a Jerusalem scene constructed from Venetian glass. The PJ Davis community centre, a mikvah, bet midrash and hall are also located on the complex. The synagogue's cemetery and funeral chapel is located in Dunham.

From 1921, **Delamere**, Cheshire, was also the home for the Delamere Forest School, originally created for young Jewish TB sufferers from the slums of Red Bank. It closed in 2011 after functioning for 90 years. The Yeshurun Hebrew Congregation in **Cheadle** started life in 1963 when, after initial worship at the Friends Meeting House, a home on Gatley Road was secured. In 1966 it amalgamated with the Stockport Jewish community and two years later the new synagogue, designed by Barry Fineberg, was constructed, with classrooms for education for the young. Fineberg also designed the synagogue which opened in May 1966 on Hesketh Road, **Sale**, for the well over 100 Jewish families then living in Altrincham, Sale and Urmston. Natan Fagleman took over as minister from Aaron Lipsey in 2011 after serving as guest cantor at Birmingham, Harrogate and Southport.

Population and Education

Whilst Hale and Bowdon are deemed two of the five wealthiest villages in Britain, the number of Jews in south Manchester is not especially high; the 2011 National Census revealed that of Greater Manchester's 10 boroughs, Bury had the largest Jewish population, with 10 302 souls. This was followed by Salford, with 7687. Both boroughs are to the north of Manchester's city centre

and boast many Jewish schools, synagogues and communal institutions. Comparatively, the Jewish population of Jews residing in Trafford, which incorporates Hale, stood at only 2413. A recent attempt to establish an *Eruv* in Hale was rendered abortive due to alleged antisemitic sentiment amongst the local populace combined with resistance from unaffiliated Jews protesting against their perception of a process towards a 'ghettoisation' of Hale.

Whilst there is one Jewish primary school in south Manchester (North Cheshire Jewish Primary School) and a nursery at the Hale Synagogue, there is no Jewish secondary school in south Manchester. Children are therefore educated at local, non-Jewish secondary schools, several of them considered of the best in the country. These include Withington Girls' School and Altrincham Grammar School for Girls (where inspectors found the percentage of pupils achieving A/A* in their GCSEs was four times the national

average) and Manchester Grammar School for Boys, founded in 1515 and rated outstanding in all areas by inspectors. In the absence of formal statistics, a Minister at one of the south Manchester synagogues estimated that around 85% of children were attending these non-Jewish secondary schools. Nonetheless, many parents are devoted to a formal Jewish education and a bus service is in operation to shuttle students from south Manchester to Jewish primary and high schools in north Manchester, in journeys that can often take an hour and a half.

Despite this unsatisfactory state of educational affairs, overall, it appears that there is a promising future for the Jews of south Manchester. Indeed, the fact that south Manchester saw the opening of three synagogues since the new millennium suggests that in the coming decades, North Manchester's hitherto unchallenged status as the epicenter of the city's Judaism may no longer be as secure as in years gone by.

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CHILD OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMP (PART 1V)

*

Don Krausz

The Gypsies were not taken out of the camp. Instead they, we Jews and the rest of the camp were put into open coal trucks and sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, 55 km away. This happened about January or the beginning of February 1945. It was winter, and very cold, exacerbated by our having to travel through the night in railway trucks that had no roofs. An armed guard was put into every truck and he sat on the edge of the truck facing us, his gun across his lap.

Those of us who had blankets were not too badly off; the others started collapsing from the cold and the biting wind. Then a man shouted at us to stand up. He had white hair, strange white-rimmed eyes, and we could tell from his number that he had spent many years in this concentration camp. He wore a red triangle, an old time Communist, and may well have been a fighter in the Spanish Civil War.

He ordered us to march on the spot with him, turned to face the guard and, placing himself two feet in front of that individual, he began to sing. He sang German songs that I had never heard before, bitter, harsh and violent Communist songs. He sang songs of the Spanish Civil War, of the early days of Communism in Germany, songs full of hate. And all the while he stood marching on the spot, staring straight into the eyes of the guard, while the guard stared back without blinking. And we marched with him, right through the night. After a while we warmed sufficiently to throw our blankets to those that didn't march and were lying on the floor. It was one of the most inspiring moments of the two and a half years that I spent in camps.

It was still nightfall when we arrived at Sachsenhausen, one of the oldest concentration camps in Germany and where 96 000 men had died. As we marched through the gates

we were confronted with barracks in fan shaped formation. On each barrack one word had been painted in giant letters the sentence: "THERE IS BUT ONE ROAD TO FREEDOM: OBEDIENCE, DILIGENCE, HONESTY, CLEANLINESS, SOBRIETY, TRUTHFULNESS, SELF-SACRIFICE AND LOVE OF THE FATHERLAND."

Jews and Gypsies were removed from the other prisoners and taken to our new abode - when I saw it my heart sank. It was a group of four barracks completely surrounded by a fence made of railway sleepers and barbed wire, and with its own gates and guards. It was a camp within a camp and from tales that I had been told I recognized this as a *Vernichtungs Lager*, a destruction camp. It was in such blocks that people were put, usually without food and water, before they were sent to the gas chambers. It was the last stop before the terminus.

Our barrack was completely empty - no tables, no benches, no beds and with a layer of wood shavings on the wooden floor. It was mid winter and people slept in the spoon position, one body against the next and holding onto one another for warmth. If one wanted to turn over, all had to turn. I once woke in the morning to find that the person that I had held on to during the night had died, and I was hugging a corpse.

The only food we received was two boiled potatoes once a day. We used to peel them, as we had been told that eating the peels would cause dysentery. Anyone who has tried to peel a boiled potato knows that the amount of potato left on the peel is minimal and yet a queue of old men would form up in front of me waiting to receive my peels. I was only 14 years old, looked eleven and was so thin that when I put my hands around my waist, the index finger and thumbs of each nearly touched each other. Surely those men could have taken those potatoes from me? They could not have: they were already too weak and would come to us children in the mornings and ask us to fasten their shirt or coat buttons for them; they no longer had the ability to do so themselves. Otto and I were lucky: our Norwegian friends had been put into the Norwegian barrack where they had access to Red Cross parcels and once

Don Krausz has served as the chairman of the Association of Holocaust Survivors in Johannesburg (She'erith Hapleitah) since 1985. Over the past three decades, he has spoken to thousands of South Africans, Jewish and non-Jewish, including addressing many school groups, on his experiences during the Holocaust.

in a while they would come to the barbed wire and feed us tidbits.

Next to our barrack was a shed where tools were kept. The Gypsy boy that I had pointed out to the prisoner camp commander in Ravensbruck got hold of me one day with about six of his pals, dragged me into this shed and proceeded to give me the hiding of a lifetime, using the flat sides of spades. I don't know how this assault would have ended, if a German individual whom I had not seen previously had not interrupted it. He took me to his rooms, cleaned me up and made me comfortable. Once I had regained my composure he began asking me about my background and we had quite a pleasant conversation. He then sent me back to my barrack but told me to return at a certain time the following day. At our next meeting we again had a friendly talk discussing politics among other things.

Took me to his private rooms in a concentration camp? Only the barrack leaders and top officials amongst the prisoners had their own quarters. Who was this man and what was he doing living in a *Vernichtungs lager*? He did not wear the usual striped uniform but a combination of uniform and civilian dress and a peaked cap. That did not mean a thing; Germans loved wearing uniforms. I also do not remember him having the usual triangle and number that we prisoners wore.

He was definitely a Nazi: once I asked him what he thought of the camps and the genocide of the Jews. "Look, Don," he said, "I like you, you're a nice fellow, but you are a little Jew and if we don't do something about it you will become a big Jew and that is no good."

This line of thinking need not have surprised me. Once in Ravensbruck I saw a guard beat a nine-year-old Jewish boy with a truncheon. I later watched that guard go off duty and walk through the camp gate to his house a little way down the road. His children came running out to meet him and he picked up the youngest and tossed it in the air like any normal father would. This was a man who liked children. I asked myself "What goes on here?" Then I realized that to this guard we were not children but a different species, *Untermenschen*, subhumans. If you come across a snake or a rat and kill it, do you stop to enquire whether it is young or old, a female or a baby?

My next meeting with my newfound saviour was a little different. He asked me to tell him about my stay in the men's camp, how long had I been sharing a barrack with the Gypsies and how did I feel about them. What was he after? Finally he came to the point: the Gypsies had originally come

from Auschwitz, Jews came to Auschwitz with diamonds hidden on their person, Jews were gassed at Auschwitz and before going to the gas chambers would dispose of those diamonds, sometimes even throwing them on the ground in their despair. Survivors of Auschwitz picked up those diamonds or managed to obtain them through other means. There was a strong likelihood that the Gypsies had diamonds.

All this was perfectly true and I knew which Gypsies had diamonds. It was also true that to hide so-called Valuta from the Germans in a concentration camp was punishable by death. If I betrayed Gypsies to this Nazi there was a fair chance that they would be tortured to reveal any others who had diamonds and that they might eventually be hanged. If they were and it would be impossible to hide my connection with this man, then my life was not insurable. It being so obviously near the end of the war, there was also the possibility that no hanging would take place, but that my Nazi would say nothing and keep the diamonds for himself. In any case this would not endear me to the Gypsies.

I began to lie for all I was worth, literally. He had me standing in front of him with my back against a wall and looking me straight in the eye, while he lay back in a chair with his hands behind his head and his feet on a table and threw question after question at me. I had shared a barrack and sleeping quarters with Gypsies. I had seen them get dressed and undressed every day. What did they have in their pockets? Did they ever boast to others about, or show off, the valuables that they had? If so who were the individuals involved? How was it possible that some one like myself, who had proved most observant during our previous conversations should suddenly be struck blind and dumb when the subject of diamonds cropped up? He insisted that I tell him what I knew. I denied any knowledge, but he caught me out in lie after lie. Then he got up and said: "Come, I want to show you something." He took me to an adjoining room that had instruments of torture and punishment hanging on the wall: whips, chains, thumbscrews, etc. He said he would be most reluctant to have to use these on me, but had to have the information that he knew I possessed. I was told to think about this carefully and to come and see him the next day. I left his quarters with soiled pants and yet he had not laid a finger on me.

I was unable to sleep that night. What was I to do? The Gypsies did have diamonds and I knew who had them. I also had no good reason to protect them. But I did not want to co-operate with the Nazis or the Gestapo,

to which this German might well belong. There was no way out but to continue to deny any knowledge and for how long could I manage to do that? I warned Otto and the others to keep away from me in case they were implicated; I did not tell them what I had experienced, in case they talked and the Gypsies got to hear about it and killed me before I could give evidence.

The following day I went to what I felt would be my final interview with this man. I was told that he was no longer there, having been transferred elsewhere. I never saw him again.

In the meantime things were going from bad to worse. I had been given the job of removing the corpses from the barrack every morning. This involved dragging or carrying them to the gate from where they would be taken away on carts or stretchers. Actually, I was quite unemotional about this, even though I was only 14 years old. It did not mean anything to me. After the war I met a friend of my parents, a Mrs Laufer, who had been in Bergen-Belsen. She told me that one of her most devastating experiences was walking over the bodies of babies in that camp and realizing that she did not feel any emotion.

At the time she had three young children of her own.

On one occasion our potatoes, instead of being handed out were simply thrown on the floor for every one to fight and scramble over, much to the amusement of the barrack leader and his friends. I did not join in this free-for-all, preferring to do without and when I looked around I saw four others stand aside. Five out of six hundred - were we less hungry than the others?

The barrack leader was a Rumanian with his nation's hatred of Jews. He was also a sadist and used to enjoy prohibiting us from going to the toilet. Some of us were children ranging from five years old upwards. I remember one such occasion when we had all been locked away from the toilet, which consisted of a pit dug between the barracks with a log on top for a seat. I think that the prohibition was for Jews only that time. The door to the barrack was open and a guard had been placed there with a pickaxe handle to enforce this order. There had been some pitiful scenes with some of the children who eventually had to use the inside of the barrack, much to the discomfort of the others who would beat them. Came nightfall and the guard at the door sat himself on a chair with his club between his legs. I watched him closely until I saw that he had fallen asleep. Then I got up and crawled on my stomach between the legs of the chair on which he was sitting. I thought that if he

detected me I would throw him over, chair and all, and run back into the darkness of the barrack. I returned the same way that I had come.

There was a German prisoner who used to come and talk to some of us. He would select a Jewish boy of about seven or eight, crouch down in front of him, affectionately put his hands on the boy's shoulders and proceed to tell the child very gently that he was employed building a gas chamber for Jews. From time to time he would reappear to inform us of the progress that he was making. He did not live in our four barracks, so he must have taken some trouble to get to us in order to convey his information. By that time we had Jewish children with their fathers or older relatives in that *Vernichtungs lager*, except that the men stayed in a different barrack. Of all the inmates there I had probably been in the camps the longest and the fathers would come and ask me what I thought of this gas chamber story. I told them that they were dealing with an obvious sadist, and to ignore him completely.

Not very long thereafter the barrack leader came and told us all to prepare for transport. We would be leaving that night. We started gathering the few belongings we had, but he told us not to bother - we would not need them. Once again I was asked what I thought of this. I had a strong conviction that nothing would happen to me, so I told my interlocutors to take this instruction to prepare for transport whence it came: from a sadistic antisemite. I went to sleep as usual, and we were not disturbed that night, but the following morning, when some of the children went to the other barracks, they found them empty and their relatives gone.

I now determined to get out of that death camp at all costs. One day I noticed two men dressed in white coats coming in to the barrack. Their red triangles were marked NL (Netherlands). They were Dutch doctors. I introduced myself and asked them for assistance. They answered that they could do nothing for me. However, they worked at the camp hospital and if I could get there they would be able to help me with food. I was also told their names and where to locate them at the hospital.

We had developed the symptoms of malnutrition: emaciation, boils, sores around the mouth and eye infections. These used to suppurate, and when we awoke in the morning our eyes would be glued shut and our faces covered with dried pus. One's first task in the morning was to feel one's way to the wash room and wash one's eyes and face. The barrack leader would not allow us to go to the hospital for treatment, nor

did he call for assistance. He knew that people were dying daily in his barrack. His responsibility was limited to ensuring that no infectious diseases broke out, for if they did, then he and the rest of the camp could be affected.

So for one whole week I only washed my eyes in the morning to enable me to see and allowed the pus to accumulate on my face. Then I presented myself to the barrack leader and asked to see a doctor. The Block Alteste took one look at me and sent me to the hospital accompanied by a guard. The Dutch doctors there made sure that I was fed, given medical treatment and, most important, a note stating that I was to return daily. I don't remember how, but I know that I got Otto to come to the hospital as well.

We made several useful contacts there. One was a Dutch doctor who was in charge of the terminal tuberculosis ward. Nobody would enter there, so I could eat undisturbed. He did warn me of the danger of contracting TB, but being Jewish and considering where I had come from, I felt that the risk was worth taking. Otto was not so sure, and did not accompany me, wisely as it turned out, for years later when my lungs were X-rayed in South Africa, tuberculosis tubercles were found.

My second contact was a Pole who worked in the hospital. The first time I spoke with him he gave me his office number and told me to come and see him on my next visit. When I duly arrived I met him as he was leaving his office, so he told me to wait for him there. I entered his room and found myself standing in the hospital mortuary. The room was filled with three-tier beds bearing naked corpses lying head to toe. Many were of young men, and all had their numbers written on their thighs in blue indelible pencil. I spent some time looking those bodies over and even experimenting with them. I had been told that in cases of malnutrition one could develop oedema in the limbs, so that if one pressed a finger into the flesh, it would leave a depression; the flesh would not readily return to its original position. I don't remember the result of my experiment though.

My Polish friend eventually returned, gave me some food and we had a pleasant conversation. It is rather indicative of the brutalizing effect that the concentration camp had on its inmates. Where else would one send a fourteen year old to be on his own with all those corpses?

I told my Dutch friends about the disappearance of more than half our number at our "camp". They told me that there was nothing that they could do for Otto and

me unless we managed to make our way to the Dutch barrack, whose number I was then given.

Right behind our barracks was a section that has become notorious. Printers, forgers, printing plate experts, jewelers and mathematicians inhabited it; some of them were Jews and I had the opportunity of meeting one of them. It was here that Sterling notes were forged, with which the Germans tried to flood the world, and which were used to pay non-German contacts and spies. It was also rumoured that some of the gold and silver that the Nazis had plundered was stored in that barrack. A 2008 film called *The Counterfeiters* dealt with this barrack.

One day we heard a loud commotion, followed by shooting. I went to investigate and found that a number of prisoners from the main camp had attacked this forgery section and were attempting to loot it. The guards had opened fire on them and there was pandemonium. I also noticed that the German guard at our rear gate had left his post in order to have a better view and was standing a few meters from the gate, which was open. This was the opportunity that I had been waiting for. I quickly returned to our barrack, called Otto, grabbed my blanket, ran back and then we slowly and nonchalantly ambled out of that gate and made our way to the Dutch barrack.

Upon our arrival there we were put in the care of a tall blond man by the name of Nobel. Mr. Nobel had been a member of the Rotterdam police force and had worked in their photographic department. He had been caught falsifying papers for the Resistance. Up to that moment we had not attended a roll call in Sachsenhausen, possibly because of the nature of the camp where we were staying. It is therefore possible that we were not missed from our barrack, and I don't know how the barrack leader of the Dutch barrack accounted for us; we did not stand roll call there either.

It is difficult after all these years to describe the relief that I felt to be rid of those horrible Gypsies. I cannot speak for Otto but I did feel pangs of conscience for having left behind our Jewish friends, but under the circumstances, what else could we do?

Two events stand out in my memory of our time in the Dutch barrack and they were both air raids. The American Super fortresses would fly over in groups of about 70 planes each and I once counted 15 such groups. These were the dreaded 1000 bomber raids. They flew so high that those giant planes appeared to be the size of one's fingernail and their contrails made streaks across the whole sky. The earth would tremble with

the roar of their engines, and when they dropped their bombs on Berlin, 25 km away, the barracks would shake.

During an air raid we would be confined to our barracks. Sachsenhausen, like most large concentration camps, was surrounded by factories, all working for the German war effort. One day the Americans paid us a visit. We watched them from our windows and saw what their *modus operandi* was. First one plane would drop a smoke bomb on a target, then the following group of bombers would all drop their bombs wherever that smoke bomb hit. One would see the smoke bomb drop among the factory buildings and a few seconds later all those buildings would vanish in a cloud of smoke, and the whole camp would shake from the impact of the explosions. It was an awe inspiring and exciting spectacle, and as afraid as we were, it was a source of immense gratification to see the Germans suffer.

The barracks were made of wood with wooden crossbeams and in ours a chimney protruded through the roof, although its stove had long since been removed. When the bombs dropped there would be a roar as if a train was passing overhead. This would allow us a few seconds time to seek cover. We were lying prone on the floor during this bombardment, when someone shouted: "Stay clear of the beams!" Very sound advice, for if a beam crashed down on one, serious injury or worse could be the result. But how does one avoid lying under a beam in a wooden barrack? We were still feverishly changing our positions when the bombs hit; our barrack seemed to have been spared, and yet a terrified cry was heard. Then every body burst out laughing: one of the men had been lying under the chimney; the soot therein had shaken loose and covered him from head to toe.

The next raid was more dramatic. Again the Superfortresses came over, again the first smoke bomb streaked down to land amongst the remaining factories, which would vanish. But then a second smoke bomb fell right outside the wall of the camp and when the dust and smoke cleared, we saw that part of the wall had disappeared. The third smoke bomb landed amongst our barracks.

Between our barrack and the next was a tiny, underground air raid shelter. Nobel and I looked at the guard with the machinegun and saw that his knees were shaking. We could already hear the roar of the descending bombs when we jumped out of the window, ran past that guard and dived headlong into the shelter. When we surfaced we found that our barrack had survived, but its rear wall had vanished. Of the barracks behind ours only burning ruins remained, and the cry

was heard: "*Leichenträger, leichenträger!*" (Stretcher-bearers).

It was in the Dutch barrack that Otto and I received our first Red Cross parcel. Every Dutchman received one, Otto and I had to share. So I took myself off to find the German barrack leader, knocked on his door and when invited in found him and his German underlings sharing a Red Cross parcel. My protests resulted in a mighty kick and the door being slammed behind me. I suppose that half a parcel was better than none.

I have not told how we came to be accepted by the Dutch. After I had spoken to the Dutch doctors in the destruction camp, I decided to remove the red and yellow star with the letters UNG for Hungarian from my clothes - definitely not allowed, but by that time I don't think that anybody noticed or cared. It was about one month before the end of the war. I spoke Dutch, had no papers and could tell where I had lived in Rotterdam - who was to question me?

The Death March

On or about 19 April 1945, Sachsenhausen was evacuated due to the approach of the Russians. The whole camp was in turmoil, with everybody, guards, officials, and prisoners mixing freely. While awaiting the evacuation, Otto and I happened to find an unconscious man sitting on the log that served as a toilet seat. He was bent double, with his head and arms hanging between his legs, and saliva dripping down from his mouth and nose. We went into the Dutch barrack to get assistance for him, but those who were there just laughed at us. The Dutch tended to be a cut above the other prisoners, but such was the brutalization of the camp that a request for assistance only aroused merriment.

We were evacuated one barrack at a time, and every prisoner was given a loaf of bread and a sausage, so I was told. It was already pitch dark when the turn of our Dutch barrack came, and we took our blankets and marched out. By that time there were no more rations to distribute, so we received no food at all. Before long we noticed a red glow behind us; it seemed that Sachsenhausen was burning. We had not walked far when a terrible sight presented itself. Right in front of us lay the corpse of an old man in a pool of blood. He lay on his back with his mouth open, his white hair and pale face glistening in the moonlight and his head surrounded by a halo of blood. His arms were stretched out above his head as though in surrender, and his eyes looked straight up at the heavens that had forsaken

him. We were forced to walk over that body, our first but not our last.

This apparition set the tone for what was to follow for the next two weeks. We were made to march 53 km that first night and the next day before we were allowed to sleep and about 30 km most days thereafter. Fifty three km is the distance from Johannesburg to Pretoria. Some days we did not have to march at all, possibly because of fluctuations in the front line. All in all we must have marched some 150 km. Everyone who could not keep up was shot. Even though I saw no casualties among our Dutch group, we kept on passing and stepping over the bodies of those who had gone ahead of us.

Thirty kilometers a day is no problem for a soldier with a full pack. We were starved, emaciated and with little strength except our will to live and the force of our despair. Otto and I, who had survived on two potatoes a day for the past three months and were not used to getting Red Cross parcels, could not keep up with the Dutchmen. Slowly but surely we dropped back and the others, egged on by the guards, overtook us. Soon we were in the last row and still dropping back towards the possibility of imminent death by shooting. Then a few Dutchmen detached themselves from the column, picked up Otto and carried him. Two others took hold of my arms and dragged me along. In the days that followed I was to see men leaving their column in order to grab a few potatoes lying at the side of the road. A burst of machinegun fire would follow. These Dutchmen had risked their lives to save ours.

It was after this incident that the Dutchmen placed us children at the head of the column, so that they would all march at our pace. This worked, the guards did not object, and we continued in this fashion for the remainder of the march.

During that first night's march, I became utterly exhausted. Then we passed a wagon drawn by prisoners and laden with the guards' private possessions. It had been piled so high that a lot of the baggage had fallen off and the guards were shouting and swearing. As we passed, a guard told me to climb on top of the wagon and ensure that nothing more fell. I climbed on top and promptly passed out; arguably, this wagon saved my life.

I do not know how long I slept on top of that wagon but everything collapsed again, trapping my Dutch blanket. I quickly joined the prisoners who were helping to push that cart, hoping that in the darkness of the night my disappearance and dereliction of duty would not be noticed. I did not push that vehicle but hung on to it and let it pull me along. Then I became aware that there

were several soldiers' knapsacks hanging from the back of the wagon. Waiting for a cloud to cover the moon, I surreptitiously put my hand in the sack dangling in front of me and felt a loaf of bread. Slipping it inside my overcoat I made my way back to the Dutch column marching alongside. That loaf was speedily divided between Nobel, Otto and me. It was the only food that we were to eat during the first three days of that march.

After a few days I noticed men taking their shoes off and soaking their feet in a stream. Their feet would swell and when told to resume marching they could not get their shoes back on. Under those ghastly circumstances this in itself was a death sentence. I determined not to make the same mistake and during the fourteen days duration of that march never once took my boots off. It was as well, for when I did remove my footwear once the war was over, the condition of my feet horrified me. I have flat feet and am sure that this was caused by that march.

During the fourteen days of the march we walked either for three days at a time without food, or the next three days without water. We would march through grain fields and try and capture a handful of grain. When we went through forests we ate the leaves of the trees that we could reach. We once crossed a stream and half of us jumped into it to drink, despite warnings that it was probably typhoid infested. One day we marched into a village and stopped to rest in the market square. Otto, Nobel and I went to reconnoiter and discovered a water pump in the backyard of a house. Happily we slaked our terrible thirst - water bottles we did not have. The pump made a squeaking sound and suddenly there was a roar. The whole column had heard it and about 800 men were rushing toward us. We got out of the way just in time.

Once I saw the dry stone of a plum or a similar fruit lying in my path. I picked it up and sucked that pip whenever I was thirsty. It was probably my imagination, but from time to time I would taste the fruit that had covered that stone. It also helped to keep my saliva flowing. The scenery would change; forests would alternate with fields and I did not notice the moment of transition, such was my stage of exhaustion.

All this time we were being strafed by Allied planes. It would reach a point where we just had to hear the first sound of a diving aircraft and we would literally hurl ourselves off the road, down thirty-foot embankments, falling and rolling as we went. A German farmer passed us with his wife and children sitting on a wagon; half an hour later we

passed them, all lying dead on the side of the road. We saw a German army ambulance with its Red Cross emblem driving towards the front, laden with ammunition. Every moving creature and vehicle was liable to be machine-gunned.

About a week after we had left Sachsenhausen, our column reached the top of a hill. Below us lay a tiny forest with paths leading into it from various directions. From our vantage point we could see columns of prisoners being driven into that forest on every path. All going in, none coming out. I had heard of this procedure; this looked to me like the preparation for a massacre. Upon reaching the forest we were told that we would spend the night there. The Germans were placing machineguns around the perimeter of the forest. I detached myself from the Dutch group, called Otto and began to look around. Eventually I found a fallen tree, which Otto and I maneuvered so that we could lie alongside it, keeping that log between the guns and ourselves.

I do not know what was meant to take place in that forest, maybe the whole thing was a symptom of my paranoia. But that night the earth started shaking with the sound of artillery fire. The Russians had broken through and we were hastily made to continue our march.

Another episode featuring forests happened when we had been plodding all day in pouring rain. Again we were sent into a forest and told to spend the night there. I borrowed a knife, climbed a fir tree as high up as I could and on the way down cut off every branch that I was able to reach. With those branches Otto and I built a shelter and lay down on the sodden earth to sleep. When we awoke the next morning our shelter was gone, and we were lying in a pool of rainwater. Some Poles had waited for us to complete our work and had then removed those branches to use for themselves.

I must tell you about sleep on this march. With sunset we would stop for the night at the nearest forest or farm. I hardly ever remember lying down, such was my exhaustion, and assume that I must have dropped wherever we halted. What I do remember very vividly was having to get up the next morning. My legs would not obey me – it felt as if they had been fastened to the ground. It was an agony that had to be overcome, and quickly too.

One day we stopped to rest at a place where two prisoners were sitting. When we were ordered to resume marching those two did not move. A German soldier repeated the order – still the two men did not obey, sitting there and staring blankly into space. One was so close to me that I could have

touched him. The soldier loaded his rifle and repeated the order: "Get up!" I wanted to scream, "Don't shoot!" but did not have the courage. A shot rang out, and the man nearest to me fell onto his side. Not a muscle in his face had moved. The remaining prisoner got to his feet and continued walking.

Sixty years after this horrible event I spoke of it at St. Stithians School for Girls in Johannesburg. By that time I had spoken at about 200 schools. I know what I can and cannot relate if I want to keep my composure. I always mention the above story to indicate what I had seen on this Death March. But this time one child in the front row asked me how I had felt and for a moment I relived the whole experience and broke into tears.

Many years later I was to deliver the eulogy at the graveside of Annush Strauss, one of the members of our Association of Holocaust Survivors. I told how Annush had been through the same experience as I, but had found the courage to tell the executioner that if he decided to shoot a woman who could no longer walk, he would have to shoot her first. The soldier slowly put his gun aside and the woman was saved. She survived to live in America. In telling my story, however, I did not mention that Annush at that time was 34 and I was 14.

Not long thereafter we awoke one morning to find the ground littered with yellow leaflets. They contained a message from the Allied commanders in the area stating that they knew exactly which German units were operating there and that unless the shooting of prisoners stopped, those implicated would be held responsible. I saw no more shooting after this. I was tempted to pocket one of those leaflets as it would have made a dramatic memento, but saw a guard watching me and became afraid. Out of the 45 000 prisoners who had left Sachsenhausen, 6000 were shot during the march. In 2005 I saw statistics that put the numbers that left Sachsenhausen on that Death March at 36 000 and the death toll at 18 000.

About the thirteenth day of our march we went through a village near Hagenau in Mecklenburg Schwerin. The inhabitants lined the streets to watch us. Suddenly a little boy called out, "Mother, those are children." "No," the mother answered, "Those are bandits". A bandit who looked like a six-year old? I think that this little episode accurately reflected the thinking of the German population despite their awowals after the war of "*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*" - We did not know.

OLGA KIRSCH'S JEWISH POETRY

*

Egonne Roth

It is exactly 70 years since the South African Jewish poet Olga Kirsch decided to leave her homeland and make *aliya*. She arrived in Israel in November 1948. It is also seventy years since her second collection of Afrikaans poetry, *Mure van die hart* (Walls of the heart), was published, to great acclaim, in South Africa. The collection marked her as a Jewish poet, not simply because of her heritage or name, but due to the content of several poems.

When Olga Kirsch, not yet twenty years old, wanted to publish her first collection of Afrikaans poetry, her mother advised her to use a pseudonym – “With the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the strong antisemitic feelings of many of its supporters, they will know you’re a Jew and that will be the end of your career.” To her credit, Olga decided not to follow this advice, and to its credit, the Afrikaner community accepted her, while fully acknowledging that she was Jewish. For many readers, it may have seemed a pure biographical fact that Olga was Jewish and that her Jewishness was not always visible in her poetry. However, she demonstrates many of the characteristics that various writers demand of Jewish writing.

Baal-Makshoves, writing in Yiddish in 1918, made this beautiful statement: “Jewish writers live and breathe between two languages, even as the bridegroom is escorted to the bridal canopy between two parents.” Olga would instinctively have understood this statement: she lived in an Afrikaans community, while English was spoken at home and Hebrew was the language of worship in the little synagogue in Koppies, Orange, Free State, where she grew up. During her life she wrote

in all three languages: English, Afrikaans and Modern Hebrew (in which there are eight poems extant).

Jewish literature often stands in contrast to ‘normal, nationalistic’ literature. The latter is closely based on a connection between a specific place and its language, whereas Jewish literature is lived between at least two languages, Hebrew and the language of the Jewish author in the Diaspora; as well as between the land of habitation and the place of Jewish imagination. “Next year in Jerusalem,” remains the dominant Jewish refrain – *in die jaar wat kom sien ons Jerusalem*” (in the coming year we shall see Jerusalem) as Olga expresses it in her sonnet *Heimwee*. In each volume of Afrikaans poetry that Kirsch published Jerusalem, the Jewish homeland etc. is present. It is for this reason that the critic Hilda Grobler, in writing about *Geil Gebied* (1976), titled her review “*Moeë Jodin ‘stotter’ oor vaderland*” (Tired Jew ‘stutters’ about fatherland). She was the only reviewer who ever referred to Olga Kirsch in this derogatory manner.

Olga Kirsch grew up in a kosher home, where she and her siblings attended *cheder* where Tenach, Talmud, and Biblical Hebrew were taught and where they heard from an early age the Shabbat blessings and *Zemirot*, Jewish liturgical songs on Shabbat and the Jewish religious holidays. For each of these festivals there are many songs that Jewish children grow up singing and as music played an important role in the Kirsch home, this was especially true for the Kirsch children. Many of these songs are very rhythmic – a factor that may have influenced the development of Olga Kirsch as a poet. Her poetry has often been described as lyrical and musical.

Kirsch wrote some strongly Jewish poetry in Afrikaans, all of which has been published, but among her unpublished English poetry is some of her most moving Jewish work. The passion for and joy at the establishment of a national Jewish homeland finds no stronger expression in the Kirsch oeuvre than in the manuscript called “*Nevertheless*”. To fully appreciate this epic poem one should look briefly at her sonnet “*Die wandelende Jood*” (The Wandering Jew), first published in 1946 in the second edition of *Standpunte*, an Afrikaans literary journal, and also included

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in her second volume of Afrikaans poetry, *Mure van die hart*, (1948).

The Wandering Jew

O Daughter of Babylon, you who
will be destroyed, happy
is he who revenges on you
what you have done to us
God condemned his people to the fire,
machine guns, gas chambers and the grave.
he gathered them into church and barn
and with white lime and the flame
punished them
And a few arose from the destruction
ill and broken, with eyes that carry death's
stark oblivion and again travelled
through strange lands to the maternal womb.
Resumed the centuries old pilgrimage
with shuffling feet and bent
shoulders. But at the end of the road
one turned them away with indolent eyes.
Will God in wrath smash the gates to
pieces
that my tired people may once again
enter in.¹

The act of 'keeping in remembrance', a central tenet of Jewish life, is also central to this sonnet. In its first stanza, the horrors of the Holocaust are evoked in stark images and by mentioning the church, its role in the persecution of the Jews is implied. In the last stanza, the poem also invokes the post-war rejection of the survivors by most countries: "But at the end of the road / one turned them away ..." ["*maar aan die einde van die pad / het een hul weggewys ...*"]. In 1946 the full facts about this page in European history were only beginning to emerge, and little had as yet been written about it in literary terms. Olga's drawing attention to it in a country that had in some quarters been supportive of Nazism was remarkable and fearless. The third stanza alludes to the refusal by the British authorities to allow survivors of the Holocaust to enter Palestine. Olga was thereby potentially alienating herself both from those who had supported the British and from Christian Afrikanerdom. It is possible that when the poem was first published many of her readers did not fully understand allusions which any Jew would easily identify.

The long epic poem *Nevertheless* was written twenty years later, when Olga had been in Israel for eighteen years. She submitted it to the socialist Zionist journal *Jewish Frontier* in New York but the editors chose to publish only a section under the name, "*Poems of Independence*". It appeared in April, 1966. The poem's strong sense of immediacy derives from Olga's decision to

write in the first person plural, as though the immigrants' story was her own, and her use of an urgent verse rhythm that at times can make a reader feel breathless.

Here I present the whole poem with some contextualisation and analysis.

"... and if the Almighty had not brought
forth our fathers from Egypt, we and our
children and our children's children
should still be in bondage ...
Therefore it is incumbent upon us ..."

The epigraph has been drawn from the liturgical song *Dayeinu* (It would have sufficed us), which is part of the *Pesach seder* liturgy. The poem continues, *mutatis mutandis*, in the way that *Dayeinu* continues:

Therefore it is incumbent upon us
To tell how we came to this land,
How the little ships slipped through the
twilight
And the dinghies through the darkness.
How we jumped, stumbled and went under
How hands raised, steadied and directed us,
How the last wave's surge
Carried us up shelved shingle
Which some kissed
Wiping salt lips
Chilled, bladder pricking with fear
Of searchlights and shots from the dark
We struggled through dunes
Huddled in trucks
Swayed and swung by winding ways
To our hide-out
We fed and bedded down
Slept like the dead
Woke to a leaping sun
And it was evening
And it was morning
One day.

This opening section of the poem begins as the conclusion of *Dayeinu* starts: "Therefore, it is incumbent upon us," though Olga combines that liturgical injunction with the divine command "To tell how" (*Haggadah* means, essentially, "telling"). The narrative of the Torah exodus is replaced by fragments of tales that she had heard in the streets and cafés of Tel Aviv. Connecting these stories to the exodus from Egypt through the use of liturgical language functions to sanctify and legitimise the ingathering of the Jews in modern times. The line "Of searchlights and shots from the dark" immediately invokes the Holocaust stories about the camps with their large searchlights; of hearing shots in the dark and the terror it evoked. Olga also used the image of the searchlight in her first published collection, *Die soeklig*, in which she responded to the

Second World War and the young men who fought in it. There she did not specifically focus on the war against the Jews, but on war in general, where the searchlight combs the sky for an enemy plane. By the time she wrote *Nevertheless*, she had access to survivor and other personal accounts of what had transpired. Her husband Joe Gillis had arrived just after the establishment of Israel; he was taken ashore illegally, as Haifa was still under blockade by the British navy. A recording exists of him telling of his experiences, and section I of *Nevertheless* reads in many ways like a dramatized version of his story. The contrast in the images used in the last two lines of the main stanza, "Slept like the dead / Woke to a leaping sun", affirms the change in the lives of these new immigrants: They were coming from a place of death to a place of life. The sad irony of the reality that awaited them is suggested in later sections of the poem. Section I ends with a reference to the first chapter of the book of Genesis, verse 5: "Vayehi Erev, vayehi boker, yom echad" Olga translates these words exactly from the Hebrew, rather than using the generally rendered translation ("It was evening, it was morning, the first day"). In this manner she continues to tie modern history to the Biblical story, thereby further legitimising history in terms of the *Torah*.

II

And it is incumbent upon
To speak of the city besieged,
Her streets snarled with barbed wire wall
to wall,
Of the rubbish and the rubble
The sniping and the silence
And the running bent double,
Of hunger, thirst and stench
Of violence
Where now serenely trees descend the steep
And gutted truck and armoured car and
jeep
Wheels tendered towards a narrow track
of sky



The destruction of Jerusalem, 1948.

Lie rusting under paint.
The annual wreath shrinks dry
And slips awry:
Bab-el-Wad.

The images in section II are strictly those of the War of Independence. It opens with a description of the destruction of Jerusalem in 1948, using powerful images to build a portrait of the city in crisis. In contrast, nearly twenty years later, the valley of Bab-el-Wad (Arabic for 'valley gate') that joins the capital to the coastal plain is quiet. Yet the traveller is not allowed to forget the war – the remains of battles fought to get essential supplies of water, food, and medicine to the Jews in the city are still evident. Haim Gouri wrote a poem in honour of these battles, in which he had been a soldier. After Shmuel Pershko set the poem to music, it became part of the Israeli canon and is sung regularly at memorial ceremonies. Olga would have known this song, which was first recorded and made popular by Yaffa Yarkoni in the early fifties. Ironically, some of those who died in the battles to control Bab-El-Wad were survivors from the Holocaust, who had only been in the country for a very short time.

III

Because we bred them up for death
Having no choice
Because the mind cannot remember
Tones of the voice
Because the sombre photo fades
And how they looked in other moods evades
Memory;
Because time makes them merely graves,
Stiff groves of stone
And monuments by busy ways
Standing alone
Therefore we must recall while yet we may
That they were supple, gay and strode
the streets
In motley uniform,
Liked a revolver bobbing at the hip
Could sing and dance all night
Grew drooped moustaches and ferocious
beards
Wrote songs and journals sad beyond
their years
Because they knew themselves bred up
for death
Having no choice.

In section III, the young soldiers who defended Israel are honoured and remembered. The section opens with the lines, "Because we bred them up for death / Having no choice" and ends with a variant of the opening line: "Because they knew themselves bred up for

death / Having no choice.” The two lines hold this section together with the sad message that those able to fight had no choice but to be prepared to be sacrificed in defence of their country. The speaker implies that doing so was what they were born for and that they knew there was no alternative. The repetition of the word “Because” at the beginning of several lines emphasizes that there is something that we must do in response to their sacrifice: “we must recall while yet we may”. Again and again Kirsch calls her readers to remember.

IV

Then suddenly one day rumour was truth:
The camp-loudspeaker crackled and rapped out
“Attention, attention all, important announcement!”
We raised our heads to listen where we were,
Working or lounging, it wasn’t the hour for news.
And the voice read: “His Majesty’s Government
Having regard to recent developments
Announces the immediate release
Of refugees in Cyprus. Ships will be sent ...”
Then the voice broke off and shouted
“Free, we are free”
And hoarse, ridiculous and out of tune
Began to sing Hatikva. Into the noon
Empty square we rushed, in sun and dust
We laughed, we wept, we shouted
Hugging each other, flinging the children up
And swinging them down till even those who doubted
Calling it all a ruse joined in the joy.
And yet, we feared the end of being pent:
Passive inhabitants of huts and tents
And cast habiliments
Kept creatures, eaters of donated bread,
How should we work and earn
And keep a roof overhead?
But we took courage, straightened up the camp
And bundled our belongings, and the ships came
Cageless this time and we went on board
In early light, the mountains still in mist,
We wearers of the lucky numbers.
And the ship stood off churning and turning slow
And the island shifted angle, altered shape
And we who had watched it grow
Now saw it shrink
And slip beneath the brink
Till nothing was but peaked and leaping sea
Even the gulls gone
Then we lay on deck

And the day passed slowly like a fast.
At last
Toward dusk there came a sudden shout
of “Shore”
And those who had trodden the land and been rounded up
And those who had glimpsed it distant lifting like mist
And those who had only heard of it, crowded the rails
Clambered on davits and stanchions,
And the ship leaned landwards and the mountain rose
Calm to a calm star and we saw the quay
Thickened with people. Then the engines ceased
And the wind’s tumult and we heard a cry
Strident and thin and high as of circling birds ---
From our own throats it rose and voices ashore
Roared answer, and the drifting ship bumped home
And we descended.
But not we alone:
Also the dead descended pressing, pressing.
And the ship stood off churning and turning slow
In Jaffa on a Saturday night
They’d stretch an awning wall to wall
To span a narrow site.
They’d sling up strings of blinking lights
Set out some chairs and tables – scrawl
A price-list on a board and call
The place “Cafe”.
And in the dusk
Came vendors of a hundred grams
Of sunflower seeds in paper twists
And tough boiled corn served in the husk
And tall balloons strung from the wrist.
Came languid couples pushing prams
And boisterous bands of girls and boys
And lonely souls who turned their backs
To chew, perusing fly-flecked toys
And plumbers’ fittings dulled with dust.
And round the tables where the throng
Sat chatting in a hundred tongues
A single voice would start a song
And all those throats would take it up
Glasses rap out a rapid rhythm
Bystanders clap, feet stamp the dust
Till breath gave out or someone thrust
A shutter back to shout for quiet.
Silent awhile they’d sit but soon
A pensive voice would hum a tune,
A melody not melancholy
But merry in a minor key.
Song followed song, in laps and prams
Sleeping asprawl the babies lay
Nobody rose to go to bed
Though Sunday was a working-day:
The living, living for the dead.

Section IV, much longer than any of the first three sections, falls naturally into distinct segments. The opening line comes a little as a surprise, as it takes the reader until the ninth line to confirm that he has been transported from Israel back to Cyprus. The story told in this section begins in the camps on Cyprus, when survivors of the Holocaust – “we wearers of the lucky numbers” – finally hear that they are free and will be taken to the land of Israel. In the first stanza of this section, the poet describes the prisoners hearing the news of their release and that they are to be taken to Israel. Their celebration is spontaneous. But, even as the survivors are filled with joy at the prospect of freedom, they are also fearful and unsure whether they will be able to adjust to the challenge fending for themselves in a strange new nation.

In the following stanza, the poet again opens with an adversative conjunction (bringing the story to Haifa where they finally arrive to a crowd waiting to receive them, answering their “strident and thin and high” cry, that sounded like the birds circling above the boats, with a roar of welcome from the shore. Though the name, Haifa, is not specified, the description (“the mountain rose / Calm to a calm star”) informs a reader who knows the geography of exactly where they landed. This arrival stands in contrast to the arrival in section I, when they had to swim for their lives and were still very frightened of “searchlights and shots from the dark”. This time, they are welcomed. But the speaker does not allow the reader to forget that, even on this happy occasion, feelings of sorrow and loss are also present, for “Also the dead descended” – and the alliteration strengthens their presence.

From Haifa the action moves to a description of the night life in Jaffa. The songs being sung at an improvised café by already established immigrants bring a calm and rest after the description of the cries and roar at the arrival scene in Haifa. Notwithstanding the “hundred tongues” that the citizens of the young nation speak, they sing as one voice, a collective voice that contrasts with hoarse and false singing that erupted on Cyprus. The final line of the Jaffa-segment – “The living, living for the dead” – allays the final line of the previous segment: “Also the dead descended pressing, pressing.”

V

Strange to be an immigrant
To wander through the centre of the town
Watching the people pass, not a face known
Everyone going somewhere, you alone
A nobody going nowhere.

Strange to be an immigrant
To wander through the suburbs of the town
Ringing at doors, asking for odd chores,
Pitied, invited in and given a drink
Making it last to let your eyes take in
The table with its starched and glossy cloth,
The ancestors enlarged in oval frames:
Grandmother neckless, hefty, grandfather mild
And bearded to the eyes; the heavy chairs
The sideboard tiered and windowed, all
that attests
To settledness.

For they promise you things will improve
but home is a hut
And work is a few days a month breaking
stones for the roads
And you cannot go back or elsewhere and
you dare not look forward:
Grim to be an immigrant.

In section V Olga describes not only her own feelings of dislocation, but also of those who, like her, were new immigrants. The first five lines appear to be a description of the speaker herself, aware that here in her new homeland she has no known identity. Line 6 repeats the first line, “Strange to be an immigrant”, but now the action moves away from the centre of the city to the periphery, where only informal, if any, employment would be available. Knowing the poet’s background, the reader realises that she is not describing her own life, but is giving voice here to immigrants from Europe, who have lost everything, including their families in the war. Olga had the possibility to return to South Africa; they have no such option. Their sense of desperation is reflected in the portrayal of them going from house to house asking for odd jobs from the *vatikim*, those who had lived in the land since before the war and were able to bring their personal belongings, such as furniture and photographs, with them. The situations of the two groups are in sharp contrast: One is established and secure; the other lives in temporary huts, occasionally working at the same backbreaking job that had killed many in the camps, such as breaking stones for roads. This desolate image of their lives leads to the powerful culmination of this section in the last line: “Grim to be an immigrant.”

VI

Sometimes at night I watch you slip
Along your deep sleep’s secret river
Your hollowed hand, your eddied hair
Your leaf-like eyelids barely quiver.
A child is such a tender thing
So slow to grow, so swift to wither.

The peaceful stream down which you come
 This easy slumber is the sum
 Of tributaries none can number:
 Children are meant to be cherished.
 Wrenched from us then how they perished
 Feeding like starved cats on garbage
 Furtive, alert
 Gaunt and befouled
 Hunted and haunted.
 Clutching each other
 Clinging to fables?
 Faded with fevers
 Dulled beyond wonder
 Terror or hunger
 Sinking at last
 None can tell where
 Callously cast
 Rotting naked to air
 Thus perished the tender
 The cherished, the fair.
 Soap, lampshades, coats
 Veldhuren
 Slave labourers unto death
 Diggers of their own graves
 Targets for idle shooting-practice through
 The guard-room door. Smoke scrolling
 heavenwards
 Offerings to what gods?
 Such grief, such rage, such outrage
 Who shall appease?
 Though we have built museums: raised
 monuments
 Enrolled their names on parchment and
 on stone
 Though for their peace perpetual tapers
 burn
 We are not eased
 Nor are their souls appeased.
 Therefore we teach their tale as history
 (The children come from school with
 frightened eyes)
 Track those who hunted them, attend
 their trials
 And give our evidence, weeping and weak
 With probing of old wounds; we pilgrimage
 To those low huts and open oven doors
 Seeking release from dreams, crowd certain
 plays
 And films and at the climax of the chase
 A thousand rise like one and roar like
 a thousand.
 Therefore at times we tell survivors' tales:
 ... Mengele held a weekly mass inspection.
 We stood before him naked having first
 pinched
 Our cheeks and bitten our lips to give
 us colour.
 He strode between the rows flicking his
 cane
 Against his gleaming boots. Time and again
 He stopped and pored into some prisoner's
 eyes.
 And the sole will to live strove in those

eyes
 To hold his gaze. If they flickered the
 stick twitched
 Meaning annihilation ...
 ... Three years we lived in the ghetto
 and one in the forest
 Fighting as partisans – using the
 ammunition
 We'd bought in the ghetto-years from
 Germans and others.
 Perilous work and the penalty death on
 the spot
 Yet many attempted it.
 Once, having bought some stuff
 And hidden it under my shirt I was
 hurrying home
 (That was the bad part, getting back to
 the ghetto)
 Walking in mid-street, wearing the yellow
 star
 As Jews were forced to, when somebody
 shouted my name
 And I saw running towards me open-
 armed to embrace
 The old professor whose favourite I had
 been
 Before our studies were stopped. I had
 only one thought:
 What if they search me now? And I
 gripped his wrists
 And I flung the old man from me and
 I fled ...
 ... It was in 'forty. I was already here,
 A cable came from my son who'd been
 left behind
 Saying he might get to Italy, asking advice.
 And I consulted many and most agreed
 That with Italy occupied, moving could
 mean no gain.
 And I cabled him saying "Stay" and the
 boy obeyed.
 And this was the sum of our wisdom –
 Those who escaped
 To Italy stayed alive but my boy was
 caught ...
 And life goes on – but the memorial season
 Quickens a grief that neither time nor
 reason
 Can quite annul and with it outrage – rage
 None can assuage.
 Only the siren can speak for us, only
 the siren
 Moaning at morning – mounting by
 semitones
 Climbing and climbing and climbing and
 smiting the sky
 Wailing and wailing, assailing the world
 and prevailing
 Stilling the cities, the villages, tillers of
 fields
 Suddenly failing, falling by quarter-tones
 Sliding to silence beside an affrighted
 horizon:

Only the siren can speak for us – having no words.

There is an element of stream of consciousness in the writing of this section. The narrator describes her own child peacefully sleeping and remarks that this is how it should be, for “Children are meant to be cherished.” Yet, in reality they are often not cared for so tenderly, and the narrator takes the reader to the conditions in the camps and ghettos of war-time Europe in harsh descriptive language. To a reader today, in the era of real-time war reportage, such descriptions are no longer as frightening or abnormal, given our media saturation of shocking images in which women and children are always the most vulnerable to violence and chaos. The last eight lines link the present with the past, lifting the whole poem out of its temporal specificity and making it part of the greater Jewish story. In these lines, the poet piles up alliteration after alliteration until the rhythm becomes like an accelerated heartbeat – the sensation that one may experience when sirens wail as still regularly occurs in Israel.

VII

And I carried you on wings of eagles
And I brought you unto Me
Not so, for we arose and left our dead
Their corpses and their ashes and we fled
Those precincts going westward, always westward

Slowly for weakness. Word was in the air
Talk of the land and longing to be there
Quit of these miseries. West we went
and south

Seeking the sea – stealing to stay alive
And killing sometimes. Many turned aside
To seek old habitations and abide
And some found ruins or neighbours
hostile-eyed

Guarding their former doorways. Southward still

Cumbered with children, with the old
and ill

Till sudden sight of sea from the last slope
Sent us careering downward wild with hope
Of what? For by the shore were other
camps.

On eagles' wings ... On the decks of
derelict tramps

Serried by night to breathe – buried by day
Within their foetid depth we made our way
Across the Mediterranean harried – worried,
Wanted in no port, wanting only one
And steering for it. Then, in sight of land
The grey ships closing in, the grim
command:

“We are about to board you – do not
resist.”

Meeting the boarding-party with a hail
Of bolts and bottles, fighting tooth and nail
Kicking and butting, clinging to the rail,
Clubbed, disentwined, transshipped and
made to sail

For Cyprus. And the end another camp.
And you brought ... yes, into this narrow
land

Of many vistas, Lapping sea and sand
Bleaching at noon, dominion of the sun
Whose lustre gilds the thistle and makes
dun

The summer months. Land of the olive tree
Whose twisted limbs and silver filigree
Fill valleys where the ancient armies
marched.

Land where the wilderness flint-littered,
parched

Falls to the date, to grain to low-clipped
vines

That stretch in parallel converging lines
To the blue-shadowed hills; of groves
and pines

And pointing cyprus. Land where sprinklers
arch

Like whirling girls their arms above the
field

And valley, plain and terraced mountain
yield

Bountiful crops: A blessed land as promised.

And I carried you on wings of eagles

And I brought you unto Me

Yes

Nevertheless.

The opening two lines of this section are drawn from Exodus 19:4, bringing this long poem back to the opening use of the *Haggadah* and closing the poetic cycle. The quotation is immediately followed by a denial, indicating that the speaker is not convinced that it was God who brought the Jews out of Europe, because she continues: “for we rose ... we fled ... we went ...” – the emphasis is on the initiative taken by the survivors of the camps. There was no easy passage home for them, since at their former houses the neighbours were “hostile-eyed”, nor was the passage to Palestine easy, “For by the shore were other camps”. The survivors were not “carried ... on wings of eagles” but on dirty, barely sea-worthy ships with no safe passage guaranteed. Yet finally the speaker does acknowledge that the Almighty brought them to the land of their dreams, which is described in agricultural and natural images as a bountiful and blessed land. Exodus 19:4 is repeated at the end of the section, followed by the final word, “Nevertheless”, drawing the previous positive descriptions into question. The homecoming at the end of the journey did not guarantee either safety or peace. The dichotomy that the

poet experiences expresses the dichotomy that many of her Jewish readers experience: the struggle of faith in the light of history.

In this long poem, Kirsch is unequivocally a Jewish writer rooted in the writings and history of her people. The poem is both poem and liturgy; spoken both in a private and a choral voice, a communal voice, an echo of the voice of history. It reminds one of the communal chanting heard in many synagogues. In the Koppies synagogue, the chanting had often been led by Olga's father, Sam, who had a strong cantorial voice. His father before him had acted as cantor in the Lithuanian village of Plunge. In this poem Kirsch continues to tread the complex and ambivalent path of "a Jewish poet in any of the languages of the Diaspora, sensitive to the interlacing of exile and sacredness, religion, language and art" (John Hollander p6). This is Hollander's description of the nature of Jewish writing in general, but it is also applicable to Kirsch's work.

Olga Kirsch may not be one of the great writers within the Jewish tradition, but she

wrote with the consciousness that she was part of the Jewish people, part of an ancient tradition and that she represents this tradition within the Afrikaans canon. It is surely time that she be remembered, both as the only Jewish voice in Afrikaans literature, and as part of the broader Jewish literary heritage.

NOTES

- 1 Die Wandelende Jood // O dogter van Babel, jy wat / verwoes sal word, gelukkig / is hy wat jou sal vergeld / wat jy ons aangedoen het // God het sy volk veroordeel tot die vuur, / masjiengeweer, gaskamers en die graf. / Hy het hul saamgeskaar in kerk en skuur / en met die witkalk en die vlam bestraf. // En enkeles het uit die puin herry, / krank en geknak, met oë wat die dood / se starre niksheid dra en weer gereis / deur vreemde lande na die moederskoot. / Die eeue-oue pelgrimstog hervat / met skuifelende voete en geboë / skouers. Maar aan die einde van die pad / het een hul weggewys met trae oë. // Sal God in toorn die poorte stukkend slaan / dat my moeë mense mag binnegaan? (*Mure van die hart*, 1948)



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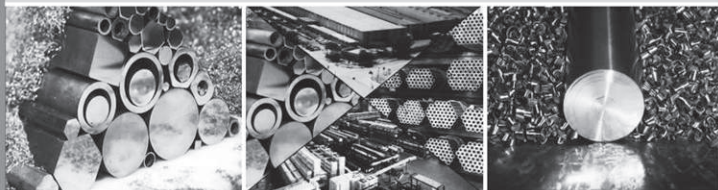
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ADDRESSING THE FUTURE

THE BATTLE OVER VELVEL'S VELVET YARMULKE (KEIDAN, 1816)

*

Gwynne Schrire

It had been a good week for Reb Nachum the Furrier. He had returned from the fair having sold most of his stock and had even managed to exchange a fox skin that had seen better days for a fine piece of blue velvet. The women of Keidan would look at his little blue-eyed Shprinzelle with seven eyes when she arrived with his wife Golda in shul on Rosh Hashanah dressed in that blue velvet.

It had been a good week for Velvel the Tailor too. His workshop had hummed with the new clothes for the *Yamim Tovim*. With the wars with Napoleon over, peace had brought prosperity. From the blue velvet the stuck-up Reb Nachum had brought him he had sewn a fine dress for the furrier's spoilt little daughter and had even managed to save enough off-cuts to make a fine blue velvet *yarmulke* for himself.

Came *yom tov*, Reb Nachum's Shprinzelle looked every inch a princess with his Golde a queen, her bulk a clear indication that in his house there was no shortage of good things to eat. However, when Reb Nachum took his seat at the Eastern wall, his pleasure at their entrance was ruined. There, at the back of the shul, in his seat among the workers, sat Velvel the Tailor. And what was that on his head? Not the greasy cap that was the badge of a hardworking artisan, but a fine new *yarmulke*, a velvet *yarmulke*, a blue velvet *yarmulke* that matched Shprinzelle's dress. Velvet *yarmulkes* were for the shul worthies, the property owners, the professionals, the scholars, the *kahal*, not for *amei ha'aretz*, the workers, the labourers, the artisans. Reb Nachum was not one to take such an insult to his dignity lying down.

When *Yom Tov* was over the *shamash* arrived at Velvel the Tailor and summonsed him to appear before the *kahal* at once. It was not for people like tailors to wear a velvet *yarmulke*. That was a privilege reserved for the rich. He was ordered to hand over his *yarmulke* and bring a fine of ten pounds of candles for the shul.¹

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However, little as the elders wished to recognise it and much as they wished to ignore it, the winds of change were starting to blow through Keidan. One of the oldest cities in Lithuania, 51 km north of Kovno (Kaunas), its Jewish community was controlled by a *kahal* with a rigidity that brooked no argument, tolerated no religious innovations and permitted no deviant thoughts. Personal liberty was for the followers of the *Haskalah* (puh! puh! puh!), not for Keidaners. The dangerous ideas of Moses Mendelssohn were not permitted in the town and Shlomo the Bookseller knew better than to allow any such books on his shelves. (But who knows what he kept under the counter?)

These winds reached gale force when Napoleon's soldiers marched through Keidan in 1812. Velvel the Tailor repaired some of their tunics and heard about their strange new ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality - even for Jews. The French were followed by the Russian army bringing more business and then came the French and then the Russians again. Of course the armies caused much havoc and looting, but there was always work for a good tailor. Naturally, the Keidaners were delighted when the French were overthrown but the ideas of the French were the subject of much talk in the taverns, even if Reb Yankel worried it might be *lashon hara*. But then no one paid any attention to Reb Yankel anyway.

Was not a Jew who sat cross-legged all day over his needle just as much a son of Adam and Eve as a Jew who travelled the country with his horse and cart buying furs? Pincus the Sandler agreed with Velvel the Tailor. So did Leibl the Butcher, Shmuel the Tavern keeper, even Yitscko the Miller and Dov Ber, whose turnips were famed far and wide. Did they not all work hard six days a week to support their families? Was it not *Hashem's* will that some were rich and others poor? Where in the Torah did it say that only rich Jews could honour the Creator by covering their heads with a velvet *yarmulke*?

Velvel the Tailor was deeply offended at the fine imposed on him, and so were the other workmen. They decided that if liberty, fraternity and equality were good enough for the French, it should be good enough

for the Jews. Did not Hillel tell them not to do to others that which was hateful to you? Would that principle not apply equally to fining someone for wearing a fine new *yarmulke*?

So, came *Sukkot*, the artisans all appeared in shul wearing velvet *yarmulkes*, *zhupitse*² and sashes round their waists, looking just as smart as the rich and respected men who sat along the Eastern wall. Looking at them, who could tell who sat on the *kahal* and who sat on a workbench? In spite of the disapproval of the worthies, they arrived on the second day of *Sukkot* dressed like that as well.

This impertinence, this disrespect, could not be allowed to go unpunished. In any case Napoleon and his forces and their crazy ideas had been repulsed. And so the elders approached Count Marian Czapski. Count Czapski treated his Jews well, not like some others they could mention, although he had not yet paid off the large sums of money he had borrowed from them when he acquired the Kedainiai estate in 1811.³



*Czapski estate in Kiejdany*⁴

On *Chol Hamoed Sukkot*, the Count's soldiers rounded up all the artisans and whipped each one publicly in the town square. Never before had the Jews in Keidan been whipped! They had been expelled for an infraction, but never whipped.

Now there was open war between the workers and the snooty property owners. No longer were the former prepared to accept the tyranny of the *kahal* administration and they laid their complaint before the judicial court. However, the *kahal* had more money to spend on bribes. The case dragged on for years, costing both sides thousands of rubles.

Then Stanislaus the Policeman let slip over a drink or two (or three) of vodka in Shmuel's tavern that they were getting ready for a visit to the town by Constantin Pavlovitch, military commander of Lithuania and Poland. Surely the Tsar's brother would not approve of the injustices they were suffering in his own courts?

Reb Mendel the Scribe prepared a petition

outlining their grievances, and Leibl the Butcher agreed to hand it over when the Grand Duke passed through. Leibl was afraid of no one. Unfortunately, word leaked through to the *kahal* and shortly before his Royal Highness and his entourage were due to arrive, Leibl got into an argument with Dovidl the Water Carrier and Officer Stanislaus promptly arrested both for disturbing the peace. At the tavern that evening Stanislaus boasted that Dovidl had been paid to provoke the fight and that his men had been standing by just waiting to arrest them.

This treachery and the loss of the next court case were the last straw and the workers decided to take the law into their own hands. Soon after, reports started coming into the *kahal* of attacks on their members - in the forest, in the lanes, on muddy paths. One could not even collect rents without being set upon by bands of toughs, who vanished as quickly as they had appeared. Twice, Reb Nachum's furs landed in the mud and once in the Nevezis River and Berel the Blacksmith was always busy with something else when his horses shed a shoe.

Stanislaus and his policemen were of little help. What could they do? They were not around when the alleged incidents happened. There was no evidence, there were no witnesses and the police were being offered a special on vodka by Shmuel to honour their services to the town.

Finally, the *kahal* sent the *shamash* to ask the artisans to negotiate. The artisans deeply regretted that such terrible things were happening to these highly respected community members. They deplored the attacks about which - of course - they knew nothing but for the sake of *shalom* in the community they agreed to enter into negotiations and just so happened to have a ready prepared list of conditions. It was hard for the *kahal* to accept the *chutzpah* of the workers and even harder to agree to sit down and negotiate but, as Ben Zoma taught, "Who is wise? He who learns from every man.... Who is a hero? He who controls his passions". The *kahal* agreed to the conditions and peace was resumed between the worshippers at the Eastern wall and the worshippers in the body of the synagogue.

So it came about that in Keidan, Jews of all classes gained the right to wear a velvet *yarmulke*, a *zhupitse* and a sash. Furthermore, the Keidan *kahal* agreed that one of its members had to be an artisan and that in any future litigation between a workman and a property owner, the workman was to be represented by a judge on his own behalf.⁵ Although the principles of the French Revolution were not taught as part of the ethos and values of Lithuanian Jewry,

at least some of the ideas of fraternity and equality had been adopted by the Keidan Jewish community.

And just to be on the safe side, the artisans established their own synagogue, Etz Chayim, with their own Eastern wall.⁶

The facts in this story are all true, and came from a journal of an artisans' group mentioned by Baruch Chaim Cassel in a 1930 Yiddish article⁷ on the Jewish Settlement of Keidan. The characters in this story are all imaginary - but they could easily have been real.

What is true is that twenty years after this momentous victory Eliahu Vilner, the richest tailor in Keidan, built a small shul nearby just for artisans and butchers. One night of the year, though, he would go to the main shul where he had purchased the right to open the ark for the closing prayer of Yom Kippur. Was it Eliahu Vilner who had worn the velvet *yarmulke*? Your guess, dear reader, is as good as mine.

See also in this issue Sorrel Kerbel's review of The Keidan Memorial (Yizkor) Book

NOTES

- 1 Boruch Chaim Cassel, "The Jewish Settlement of Keidan", (Yiddish) Keidaner Association of New York, 1930, republished in Hebrew in the *Keidan Yizkor book*, pp19-40, translated into English by Meyer Dwass in 1989 and republished in David Solly Sandler (compiler), *Our Litvak Inheritance: Volume One of Our Litvak and South African Jewish Inheritance: The History, Life and Times of South African Jews Originating in Eastern Europe*, 2016, pp17-18
- 2 *Zhupitse* (also known as *yupitse*, *yupe*, *yipetse*), was a winter outer garment, broad from the waist down, adorned with metal or textile appliques and for the wealthy was often sewn from materials such as satin, moiré, or silk, secured at the top with decorative clasps and held at the waist with a leather belt.
- 3 Kedainiai in Lithuania - Travel East and Central Europe, www.codelt.nl/kedainiai-lithuania/
- 4 Picture from Marian Hutten-Czapski – Wikipedia, wolna encyklopedia https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marian_Hutten-Czapski
- 5 Josef Rosin, "Kedainiai" chapter from *Pinkas Hakehillot Lita*, translation. In *Kedainiai" - Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Lithuania (Lithuania)* 55° 17' / 23° 58', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1996
- 6 Schoenberg disagreed and said that the shul was called Chayei Adam of the artisans – but what difference does the name make to a good story? Nancy Schoenburg & Stuart Schoenburg, *The Lithuanian Jewish Communities*, Jason Arons, 1996, p118
- 7 The story is also found in Andrew Cassell, Lithuanian Community lives in Diaspora, 17 August 2011, 70 Years Later, Lithuanian Community Lives On - News – Forward.com forward.com/news/141461/70-years-after-destruction-memory-of-lithuanian-co/



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THE GRANDMASTER (All In The Game)

*

Charlotte Cohen

The King was placed in a prostrate position: face-forward on to the chess-board.

His grandfather stood up, shook hands with his friend and walked him to the gate. Martin stared at the King lying there pathetically, like a fallen hero. As soon as his grandfather returned, Martin said "Grandpa, the King looks like he's dead!"

His grandfather sat down and drew Martin into his arms. "The King is not dead. When he is overturned, it means he has 'surrendered'... 'resigned'. He has given up the game."

Grandpa righted the King. "But with each new game, he is ready to start again. ... It's the same in real life, Martin. Sometimes when a man knows he is beaten, he puts his hand out and says: '*You played a better game this time and deserve to win!*' Often it makes him more determined to work harder, to study and practice so that he has a chance of beating his opponent the next time. Isn't that so?" The brown-hair nodded against the jacket armpit.

His grandfather set the chessmen out on the board. The hand-carved pieces stood straight and erect, proud and beautifully shaped. The horse's front legs were raised slightly, ready to jump. The castle, with tiny towers and turrets, was like the one in Martin's fairy-tale book. Martin knew the pawns were 'olden-day' soldiers because they carried shields and swords.

Everyone said that Grandpa's chess set was a magnificent one.

"The King stands guarded by his army and advisers. He is old – that is why he only moves *one square* at a time. The King is, therefore, not really a fighter. He is a symbol. He represents honour and dignity. He stands for what is *worth* fighting for ... Martin, you know that if you've lost your King, you've lost the game. And that is *exactly* the same with people. Anyone who loses his integrity and self-respect has really lost everything."

Martin was lifted onto his grandfather's lap. Although he did not always understand all the words his grandfather used, he loved being told about the pieces and how they were '– just the same as in real life'.

Martin did not always understand all the words his grandfather used, but he loved listening to him.

"Chess is a battle of wits between two armies" his grandfather continued. "It is a game where you capture your opponent's King in order to win. When you play chess, it is *you* that directs the whole army. They will do whatever you decide they should do. And they will do exactly what you decide. But, Martin, with authority, comes responsibility. You must think things through carefully before you move. You must consider all the angles – the dangers, the advantages, and the chance for victory ..."

Just then, Martin's parents returned from the club. Conversation became general – a comfortable hum of friendly family chat.

Martin fingered the King who stood in the centre of his army, his queen by his side, his soldiers standing protectively before him, ready for battle. They would fight, advance, retreat – even be captured – as he commanded. He felt a warm stir of excitement at the prospect.

* * * * *

Ever since he could remember, Martin was taken to his grandparents' home on Sundays. He looked forward to its familial ritual and familiarity – but more especially because he could be with his grandfather.

Charlotte Cohen is an award-winning short story writer, essayist and poet, whose work has appeared in a wide variety of South African publications since 1973. She is a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs.



Pick n Play

WE WISH OUR JEWISH CUSTOMERS A
HAPPY CHANUKAH
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His grandfather usually played chess on Sunday mornings. Martin would sit alongside him during the game.

The atmosphere on the enclosed front-porch was one of quiet concentration, broken only by an occasional grunt or 'check'. Martin was allowed to play with the pieces that were taken from the board which he would place in two matching rows. By the time he was five, he knew that if more white pieces were 'taken off', black was winning - and vice versa. And whichever colour his grandfather was playing, *that* was the colour he hoped would win.

During the morning, Gran would bring in a tray with tea and a glass of milk for Martin. She would pour the tea and place it, with a biscuit, on the right-hand side of each man. "Here's the tea, gentlemen. Drink it before it's cold!"

Their heads nodded. 'Thank-you's' were mumbled; but their eyes never left the board. Martin would watch transfixed until a white ring settled around the inside of each cup. "Grandpa" he would nudge "Your tea's getting cold."

"So it is. ... hmmm ... so it is ..." Grandpa would squeeze Martin's hand affectionately. "Now let's see ... what shall we do?"

Martin had never seen his grandfather drink a cup of tea during a game of chess, nor had he ever seen his grandmother fail to bring one.

* * * * *

When Martin turned seven, Grandpa asked Martin whether he would care to join them for a sherry. When Martin's mother objected, Grandpa said: "It's a good introduction into the social graces, Jean. Anyway, it's a well-known fact that 'a little of what's bad for you, is good for you'. Martin's mother commented that is was a fact that had never been proved.

Needless to say, Martin was given a little crystal glass half-filled with sherry. A flush of grown-up importance came to his cheeks. He wished them 'good health' and gulped it down. A high-powered explosive erupted in his chest. He started coughing wildly. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

After the ensuing consternation, Grandpa said: "Always sip it gently, Martin. Something to enjoy should be savoured - never taken in a hurry. What's worth appreciating must be relished, not rushed!"

"You and your arm-chair philosophy!" murmured Gran.

And Martin's mother said Grandpa had "more reflections than a mirror."

* * * * *

After lunch, the family usually sat on the porch - Martin snuggling close to his grandfather. When the chess moves were first elaborated by Martin's grandfather to his fascinated little listener, each piece was described with examples that were 'just the same as in real life'.

"This is the Queen! See the coronet around head. She is very grand and majestic and much more imperious than the King himself. She is, in fact, the power *behind* the throne. She is commanding and demanding!" Martin thought of Aunt Bertha. She was bossy - always ordering Uncle Dave around and telling everyone what to do.

"The Queen is the most powerful piece of all. She can move in whichever direction she chooses and as far as she wishes to go. Use her well, and she will demonstrate her magnificence for you on the chessboard. But think, Martin: one small mistake - a mere oversight - and the Queen with all her strength and grandeur can be taken off as easily as the little pawn. In fact, she can be taken off *by* the little pawn ... Same with people: So many fine and noble things can be achieved when beauty, wealth and talent are used wisely. But one mistake, one error of judgment - no matter how rich or powerful or celebrated a person might be, can cause him to fail and fall."

According to Grandpa, the Castle moved like "the square shape of the bricks from which it was built". It was next in importance to the mighty Queen because "a castle offers shelter and protection. Its strength lies in its solidity ... Anyone who is reliable and trustworthy, is sometimes called 'a tower of strength'. He is safe and strong - like a castle."

Martin thought his grandfather was exactly like that.

Gran once shook her head. "What are you teaching the boy, anyway?" she asked.

"Chess? - or a crash course on how to live one's life in ten easy lessons?"

Grandpa smiled. "It's the same thing" he replied.

* * * * *

Martin was taught to play chess by his grandfather: but he learnt much more than the moves. He never tired of hearing his grandfather's comparisons between people, situations

and the chess-pieces. They left an indelible impression. His understanding of the capability and culpability of human nature grew apace with his knowledge of the game.

The Bishops were described as 'stately and righteous - church leaders and advisers to the royal household.' ... "The bishop moves on the chessboard just as he raises his hands in blessing. Diagonally. So that a bishop that begins battle on a white square, remains on white squares throughout the game. He never gets to stand on black soil, so to speak. And the same applies to the other Bishop. He never gets to stand on a white square - ever, right throughout the game."

Grandpa paused for a moment. "And, in a way, that is their greatest weakness! ... A man who sticks to the 'straight and narrow', who is too confined in his thinking (no matter how upright his thoughts may be) never experiences the adventure of discovering what lies on the other side. He limits himself, like the Bishop, to only half the squares on the chessboard!"

Martin could see exactly what his grandfather meant.

The Knights (horses) were men of "dash, spirit and courage". They moved in an extraordinary manner - jumping right over other pieces - "because the Knights of old were extraordinary men. There are men like that too" Grandpa explained, "men with nerve, guts and determination. They take liberties because people expect it of them and respect them *because* of it."

Grandpa never 'spoke down' to Martin. He treated him as a younger, smaller person - to be taught, nurtured, appreciated and loved.

The pawns were given the same respect. "In value, the pawn is the lowest-ranking on the board. Small and vulnerable, they nevertheless stand ready for combat, to fight for and protect their King."

Martin nestled close to the old man. "How are they in real life?"

Grandpa considered. "The Pawn is like any ordinary person- not born to position, fortune or possessing great talent. Nonetheless, if the pawn can make his way over the board, he gains the power of a Queen! It seems a long way and there are obstacles in his course. But look! It is really only six squares! ...So, *anyone*, no matter how humble he was when he was born - and despite all the difficulties he may encounter on the way - *can* attain the highest position, on the chessboard and in life! No limits can be set on one's determination or efforts to achieve one's goals."

* * * * *

By the time Martin was ten, Grandpa said he played well for his age. He never said, "I'll have you a game, Martin." It was always "I *challenge* you to a game." And the two, who loved each other so much, would sit opposite each other - adversaries for a short while.

Grandpa never 'played down' to the young boy by allowing him to win. But constantly, reminded him to weigh the possibilities, consider the dangers and plan the attack ahead - invariably making his point by comparing it with situations that were 'just the same in real life'

"---Maybe carelessness cost you your Bishop!"

Then, seeing the boy's face: "Okay! So you lost your Bishop! That doesn't mean *all* is lost! There are other men on the board to help you. Same in life: Give others a chance to help you - and keep fighting!"

..... When Martin cornered his grandfather's King in an effort to finally 'check-mate' him, the King was left in a position where he had no place to move - which effectively made it a 'stalemate'. The result: a draw!

Disappointment clouded Martin's face.

"Well played, Martin! Your attack was well thought-out; your moves made with foresight. You did the best you could and you played a really good game. And that's the real victory."

His grandfather showed him something written by Grantland Rice.

"When the One Great Sorcerer

Comes to write against your name

He marks, not that you won or lost

But how you played the game."

Gran brought in tea. "Martin, your grandmother sometimes calls me 'an old windbag'. But always remember this: When we sit before a chessboard, we both start with the same pieces, in the same position. We have, in our lives the same attributes to choose - the King's honour, the Queen's brilliance and arrogance, the Castle's steadfastness, the Bishop's confined virtue, the daring and gallantry of the Knight or the Pawn's humility and endeavor. It's *what* we choose to use that shapes our destinies and gives us victory."

Gran sighed. "Martin, I have never referred to your grandfather as an 'old windbag'.

But he does sound like a cross between Confucius and Dale Carnegie at times.”

Grandpa smiled and thanked her for the compliment.

Martin beat his grandfather for the first time when he was twelve.

Never had a man lost a game with such pride.

* * * * *

On Martin’s fourteenth birthday, Grandpa gave him a book describing the ‘Match of the Century’, when Bobby Fischer beat Boris Spassky in Reykjavik. They pored over it together; compared Spassky’s formidable calm with Fischer’s temperamental outbursts. Martin read: “*When Spassky at eighteen was named an international grandmaster, he said, ‘The chess figures are like my relatives. I know the peculiarities of each one.’ To Benjamin Franklin, chess taught ‘foresight, circumspection, caution and the habit of not being discouraged’. For Einstein – ‘it in some ways, shapes the spirit.’ To Bobby Fischer - “The game, not the tournament result, is the main thing.”*

Spassy said, “*Chess Is Like Life.*”

Fischer said, “*Chess Is Life*”.

Well, all this was nothing new ... His grandfather had been saying it for years!

Martin thought about his grandfather - a teacher, a story teller, an interpreter, a philosopher ... a grandmaster on the chessboard of life.

* * * * *

One Tuesday, Gran phoned. The doctor had been called. Grandpa had bronchitis.

Martin walked to the mall for a ‘get-well’ card. He could not find any suitable. They were too sentimental and flowery, or silly and frivolous. Martin wrote his own greeting when he returned:

I hope you’re not Chess-ty
 I hope that you’re not Horse
 Please ask the doctor to Check
 Whether smo-King has made you worse
 A-Pawn my word I’m sorry
 That to-Knight you’re feeling sick
 Please get better very soon
 I need a game - but quick!
 He thought Grandpa would like it, and it was sent.

They went out as usual the following Sunday. Grandpa was still in bed. He was very breathless. His cough was hoarse and rasping and went on for long spells. He proudly produced Martin’s card and excused himself for not challenging Martin to a game.

Lunch was dismal without him. For the first time Martin could remember, Gran’s food was tasteless. The conversation was forced with unnatural stretches of silence – broken only by Grandpa’s intermittent and prolonged coughing. Without Grandpa’s philosophizing, there seemed very little for anyone to say. The family did not remain after lunch.

* * * * *

The following Thursday when Martin returned from school, his mother told him Grandpa had been admitted to hospital. “The cold got on to his chest – like pneumonia”, she said. Although his mother spoke calmly, she appeared flushed and much too busy.

Martin stared at her. He could not visualize Grandpa in a hospital bed. Only at home... nodding over a chessboard ... thinking ... smiling commenting on life.

He felt the cold hand of fear gripping his throat.

The next day, Martin could not concentrate. Lessons dragged. As soon as the final bell sounded, he went home. No one was there. He tried to do some homework.

At 4 o’clock, the front-door opened. He took one look at them and he knew!

Martin swallowed loudly. His father was tight-lipped; his mother’s eyes red and swollen. She held the beautiful wooden box containing the chess-set and some books.

“He asked me to give you these. ... Oh, Martin, he was so proud of you. He loved you so much.”

Her voice ebbed away as she hugged him and sobbed.

Martin heard himself swallow again. It wasn’t possible! It couldn’t be! His grandfather couldn’t have died!

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He took the chess box and went to his room. The tears he held back now released themselves.

He opened the box and fingered the lovely pieces again as he set them out on the board. *It was a magnificent chess-set. Everyone said so!* He remembered the first time he saw the King lying face-downwards. *"Grandpa, The King looks like he's dead!"* And the reply: *"The King is not dead ... He has surrendered sometimes when a man is beaten, he must accept it. ..."*

"Grandpa, tell me it's not true! You taught me about 'Life'. But what when there is no more life? When the game is ended forever? "

The squares on the chessboard merged into wet blurriness.

He heard his grandfather's voice. It was right there opposite him. "Martin, the game is not ended forever. Although it won't be you and me, you'll pick up the pieces and play with someone else ... So life itself continues, even though each of us has just a short span.

Martin, *look* at the chessboard! – There are white *and* black squares. Like light, bright days and dark, sorrowful ones. There'd be no game, if all the squares were white! So, just as we accept defeat, we accept the dark days when they come. And they do - in everyone's life.

As for death itself --- some chess-games are played by correspondence and can continue for weeks – even months. But whether the game is won, lost or drawn, at some time it must end. Life is the same. It would be meaningless, it would not be so precious, if it went on forever.

Words, phrases, memories crowded into Martin's mind. 'We all have twenty-four hours in one day. It's how we *use* it that gives us victory. It's the attributes we choose that shapes our destinies'.... "Chess Is Like Life" ... "Chess *Is* Life"


"He marks not that you won or lost, but how you played the game".

Martin looked at the King. 'He represents dignity... honour ... integrity ... someone to look up to'.

His grandfather had been a king too.

Martin closed the box and went outside. He knew now that he understood a little of the game.

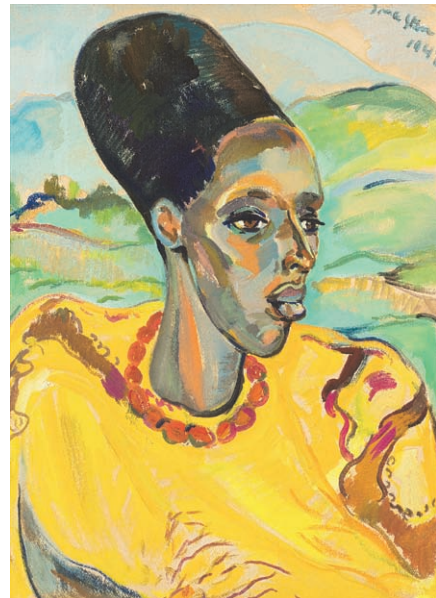
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THE KEIDAN MEMORIAL (YIZKOR) BOOK) – A NEW TRANSLATION

*

Sorrel Kerbel

This Keidan Memorial (*Yiskor*) book in English translation is a wonderful achievement, one that will enable English speakers to read for themselves the unique accounts of a once vibrant Jewish community ultimately destroyed in the Holocaust. Two months following Operation Barbarossa, the German attack on the Soviet Union, all that survived of that community was a large mass grave and just three eyewitnesses.

The book offers a precious glimpse into daily life in what was an important city in Lita from the late 19th to the mid-20th Century, when almost half of the population was Jewish. Included are heartfelt personal reminiscences; scholarly 'Litvak' reflections on literary, political, Zionist and economic concerns; vivid accounts of Kaidaner personalities, rabbinic and secular, and of folk 'types' and customs; and an important section of harrowing first-hand accounts of the Shoah.

As a descendant of Rabbonim who didn't know her grandparents, I loved reading Yitzhak Edelman's "Memories of my Teachers". The story barely mentions his Rebbe, who taught *cheder* from the main entrance to the house. The Rebbe, of course, had nothing to do with the store – that was his wife's domain. Keidan's Rebbetzin offers her customers whatever goods they need. Farmers come to market to buy new horse whips (often stolen or broken in drunken brawls) and almost everyone requires the

ubiquitous axle grease to "oil those wheels". This entrepreneurial Rebbetzin decants a few kopeks of fish-oil into a small bowl so the customer can paint it onto his boots with a brush, "leaving proud and happy with his glistening footwear."

The Rebbetzin also owns a goat, whose beard the children love to pull when no one is looking. The goat often stands on its rear legs leaning on the half door to the store "as if looking for a customer"! That wonderful image lives with me – though I know that my own Bobbe in Rakishok sold yeast and didn't keep a goat!

The photographs, too, are important, though somewhat grainy and indistinct in this printing. They show school classes in *cheder* and also, schools taught through the medium of Hebrew in the years of an independent Lithuania, when there was a special Ministry for Jewish Affairs. There are images of the early Zionist pioneers of the land, the 'Kibush' training farm in 1924 at Pelednagai, a neighboring Government estate. This was the first *Hachshara* training centre in Lithuania. Another photograph from 1924 shows the aspirant *chalutzim* (pioneers), men and women men side by side with hoes and rakes, even before the establishment of ORT – OZE, an organisation that sponsored and taught agricultural training and other skills for those wanting to make *aliya*. There is a photograph celebrating the 10th anniversary of ORT OZE in 1937. One finds a smiling photograph of the firefighters' football team before a match against the Jonava Maccabees, and another of the Jewish volunteer firefighters, so necessary for those who lived in precarious wooden homes, complete with helmets and modern

Sorrel Kerbel (D.Phil, UCT) is editor of Routledge Encyclopedia of Jewish Writers (2003 and 2010) and contributor to the Yiskor Book of Rokiskis (Jewishgen.com, 2018).

machines. This was after the disastrous fire of 1914 that wiped out half the city, while water from the river was easily to hand. It includes the heroic Tzadok Shlapobersky, who was also an officer in the Fourth Brigade of the Lithuanian army.

In his essay *The Girl From Human Street* (*New York Times*, 1 April, 2016), Roger Cohen writes, "Every Jew of the second half of the 20th Century was a child of the Holocaust. So was all humanity. Survival could only be a source of guilt, whether spoken or unspoken. We bore the imprint of departed souls ... I wanted to understand where I came from." This quest for knowledge about the silenced past is vital if we are to understand the present and look to the future.

Following the German invasion, in the period 23 July - 24 August, 1941, there emerged in Keidan and other parts of Lithuania, a Lithuanian fifth column of fascists and hooligans who organised themselves into so-called 'Partisan' groups that set about murdering Jews and plundering their property. This was well before the decision, taken at the Wannsee conference in January 1942, to exterminate all Jews in Nazi-held Europe. A leading part in this was "played by professionals and the educated, by doctors, chemists, teachers, government officials, as well as their sons ... headed by two notorious Lithuanians, Povylius and Markunas, both sons of past mayors and the three brothers Varys, Juazas and Stepan Sulcas, who lived on the horse market square" (*Keidan*, p230). The names of the leading members of this group of willing collaborators of Keidan are listed by a Jewish eye-witness, David Wolpe. They were originally published in the Yiddish journal *Fun Letstn Khurbn* in Munich 1948 and in English in 1950 by the Keidaner Benefit and Benevolent Society in Johannesburg.

Wolpe also the names Vaclovas Lacinskas, a carpenter of Josvainu street, and a Raudonis (his first name is not given), owner of the Hotel Vilnius, who were involved in the brutal murder of Tzadok Shlapobersky. Shlapobersky died a hero, pleading for the lives of his children, then, in late August 1941, attacking the Nazi officer in charge of the mass shootings at Count Tottleben's estate. In another incident, Lithuanians rounded up 100 Jews, alleged Communists, who were forcibly marched through town and shot in the Babenai woods about two miles away. The names of both killers and victims are there. Other harrowing tales include that of Rachel Shisiansky, wife of Aba Shisiansky the miller, who pleaded that she be shot

before her children, whereupon her children were wrenched from her and shot before her eyes. There were elderly and ailing women brought by car and then buried alive and small children killed by Lithuanian bayonets. Many Jews were rounded up from *shtetlach* like Shat and Zheim and slaughtered. Those who hid in houses and sheds in Keidan, when rounded up, faced forced labour and death by famine and typhus in the ghetto. By December 1941, Commandant Jaeger, in charge of the all Nazi forces in Lithuania, was able to record in his detailed notebooks (not in this book) that the Jewish problem was already solved in Lithuania. Jews in Lithuania thus perished in huge numbers by bullets even before the gas chambers at Auschwitz or Treblinka began functioning.

Some young Jews from Keidan tried to flee to enlist in the Russian army; many were shot at by Lithuanians before they reached their regiments. There is a list of those who reached the Soviet army, several of whom achieved distinction in combat. Then the German forces reached Keidan, decreeing that the remaining Jews wear yellow patches and be forced into labour camps.

On the last page of the book is a reminder: "There is no relief in this book for the wounded soul of a son of Keidan. However there is in it a eulogy and a Kaddish (prayer for the dead) which was not said on the grave of the martyrs, and which will be said now whenever we take this book into our hands."

The new English translation, overseen by Aryeh Leonard Shcherbakov and Andrew Cassel, is refreshingly direct and punchy, making for easy reading. It should be of interest to scholars of Jewish history as well as to Lithuanian historians, economists and sociologists. Jewish genealogists and others seeking to trace their roots in the city may be a primary audience for the valuable material provided. However, it has the potential to be of much broader interest.

Keidan Memorial (Yizkor) Book, compiled by David Solly Sandler, edited by Aryeh Leonard Shcherbakov and Andrew Cassel and translated by Bella Golubchik, Jeremiah Curtin, Meyer Dwass, Chaim Charutz, Miriam Erez and others. Originally published in Hebrew and edited by Josef Chrust, Tel Aviv, 1977. This English edition published by the Keidan Association in Israel and USA in English, June, 2018. Available only in soft cover from D S Sandler sedsand@iinet.au @ USD50 including delivery; all proceeds go to Arcadia Jewish Children Home, Johannesburg.

POGROM. KISHINEV AND THE TILT OF HISTORY

*

Milton Shain

Israel's national poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik captured it in poetry; the Irish republican Michael Davitt drew on reports about it for a book; political activist Emma Goldman professionally engaged with it, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) emerged as a by-product. The 'it' referred to is the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 - a seminal event in modern Jewish history and the subject of a new book by Stanford historian, Steven J Zipperstein.

The events of Kishinev were horrific. Yet by the standards of slaughter in later decades of the 20th Century, the number of deaths was minimal: Forty-nine Jews were killed. But the impact was huge. One way or another, the Kishinev pogrom penetrated political agendas across the world. Its horror was employed in political battles in the United States and appropriated to advance ideological initiatives. 'Pogrom' entered the lexicon of everyday usage, while Kishinev became a metaphor for barbarism.

On 19 and 20 April 1903 (6 and 7 April on the Julian calendar), this small Bessarabian town was torn apart following an accusation that Jews had killed a Christian child for ritual purposes. Long-standing hatreds had patently existed below the surface as mobs took to the streets exacting revenge on an imaginary foe. Six hundred women were raped, and more than a thousand Jewish-owned houses and stores ransacked or destroyed in an orgy of hatred. Most of the violence was conducted in a mere four hours. Kishinev - hitherto an unknown sleepy backwater in the Russian empire - replaced 'Dreyfus' in the headlines of the world's press. Michael Davitt reported on the senseless and brutal carnage for the Hearst Newspapers, and his brilliant accounts set an acclaimed journalistic standard. Details of the eruption were also collected by Bialik, whose poem 'In the City of Killing' retains a contemporary relevance for Jews and Israelis and maintains 'an authority akin to that of an amalgam of Samuel Coleridge with Walt Whitman and the Book of Job' (p129).

Zipperstein traces these events, adding new facts and dismissing older inaccuracies. For example, the infamous letter from the Minister

of the Interior, Vyacheslav Konstantinovich Plehve, pointing to the involvement of the Russian government was a forgery. Instead, Zipperstein places substantial blame on the writings of Pavel Krushevan, arguably the co-author of the fabricated and infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and certainly the first to publish the original version of the *Protocols* in his newspaper, *Bessarabets*. He maintains that without the antisemitic hatred that spewed from that newspaper's columns, the events of Kishinev would have been unlikely. As an icon of the Russian right, Krushevan therefore bears considerable responsibility.

Zipperstein also explores with great sophistication ways in which the Kishinev pogrom impacted on both representations of the Jew and on Zionist identity. The pogrom had immediate echoes in the United States: Israel Zangwill referred to it in his play, *The Melting Pot*; activists wishing to end lynching and improve the lot of African-Americans appropriated the tragedy to further their own struggles, which in turn facilitated the creation of NAACP in 1909. Further afield, in Palestine, the *Haganah* owed its origins to the pogrom. 'The massacre', writes Zipperstein, 'would provide so many Jews as well as non-Jews with a conclusive sense of past and present. It would constitute for many the final nail in the coffin for prospect of Russian Jewish integration, the ultimate verdict on the necessity for emigration to the United States or Palestine, the clearest of all clarion calls for revolution, and the starkest of all proof regarding Jewry's uncanny worldwide influence. It would be invoked as the grimmest of all modern Jewish humiliations, as evidence of the necessity for Jews to fight resolutely against their foes, and as evidence of a Jewish cunning so supremely manipulative that the benefits accrued from violence far outweighed its harm' (p.206-07).

Pogrom. Kishinev and the Tilt of History is a carefully researched, richly illustrated and thoughtful contribution to Jewish and general historiography. It demonstrates how an event that shook the Jewish world first and foremost had reverberations far beyond. The Kishinev pogrom not only prefigured the Holocaust but also shaped a global Jewish consciousness.

Milton Shain is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Historical Studies at UCT.

Pogrom. Kishinev and the Tilt of History by Steven J. Zipperstein, Liveright Publishing Corporation, WW Norton & Co, 2018.

new POETRY

White Impatiens

Do not ask me how or why
With no planning ... or planting
... no water ... no care
It pops up here and there
and everywhere
Deciding for itself where it wants to go
where it wants to be
and wants to grow
In the driveway, between cracks
In some dirt between the bricks
In a patch of parched dry soil caught in the slate
... or as a welcome at my front gate

With no rain and the taps run dry
I watched my garden slowly wither and die
... except for the white Impatiens
which seemed not only to survive
but also to thrive
on neglect and going it alone
at its own pace
and in its own chosen space

With emptying dams offering not a drop of support
The Impatiens gave not a damn about the drought
or how much water it had to do without

And whether the weather
brought aridity or storm
the Impatiens remains
in radiant bloom
- a lasting reminder of the loveliness
and strength
which stems from resilience

People stop at my front gate
to admire the white ever-blossoming Impatiens
and I give them some cuttings
which I know will grow
into beautiful, flourishing flower-full bushes
wherever it is taken and wherever it lands
and whenever it is transposed with loving hands

Charlotte Cohen

On Certain nights...

On certain nights
the hills of Jerusalem
stop singing.
The evening cups the ears
of all who sleep –
and God sits
on the hills
surrounded
by the whisper
of small wings.
On that night
the secret notes
in the Western Wall
turn to doves.
All the notes
except mine.
Instead of wishing
I wrote my fears....

*Bernard Levinson**

** This poem was
erroneously published
in the Rosh Hashanah
2018 Jewish Affairs
issue under the name of
Honey Gluckman. The
editor sincerely apologises
to both distinguished
contributors for the
unfortunate mix-up.*

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