

JEWISH AFFAIRS

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JEWISH AFFAIRS

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In publishing JEWISH AFFAIRS, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies aims to produce a cultural forum which caters for a wide variety of interests in the community. The journal will be a vehicle for the publication of articles of significant thought and opinion on contemporary Jewish issues, and will aim to encourage constructive debate, in the form of reasoned and researched essays, on all matters of Jewish and general interest.

JEWISH AFFAIRS aims also to publish essays of scholarly research on all subjects of Jewish interest, with special emphasis on aspects of South African Jewish life and thought. Scholarly research papers that make an original contribution to their chosen field of enquiry will be submitted to the normal processes of academic refereeing before being accepted for publication.

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JOSEPH SHERMAN – THE PASSION FOR YIDDISH

*

Cedric Ginsberg

It is now almost a year since the untimely passing of Joseph Sherman, scholar, translator, lover of Yiddish, raconteur. In 2001, he left South Africa to take up the position of Woolf Corob Professor of Yiddish at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford. His years there were exceptionally creative. Apart from scores of journal articles, he published several major studies and the translation of Dovid Bergelson's novel *Descent*.

From 1991-1999, Joseph edited *Jewish Affairs*. He was the first external editor of the journal and the first incumbent who was also a fulltime academic. Previous editors included Henry Katzew (1946-1952), Amelia Levy (1952-1968), Chaim Lewis (1968-1977) and Hadassah Sacks (1977-1991). All of these able individuals contributed in their own way to the establishment of a quality journal which came to be recognised as the cultural mouthpiece of South African Jewry. When Joseph assumed the role of editor in 1991, the journal thus already had a proud legacy of over forty years of publication of quality articles dealing with literary, historical and philosophical matters.

However, Joseph added a dimension to the journal which had previously not been present. He introduced an academic essence that transformed the journal. Through him, the editorial board was expanded to include academics of varied background but with a common concern with Jewish interests. Many of these members became regular contributors. A few years into his editorship, he attempted to have *Jewish Affairs* accepted as an academically accredited journal. This would have meant that articles published in the journal by academics would have been subjected to peer-review and would thus be recognised as academic papers by the Ministry of Education. He believed that if *Jewish Affairs* could gain academic accreditation, it would be easier to solicit articles from the academics, but he was unsuccessful in this quest. The Ministry ruled that while some articles were thoroughly researched, substantiated and peer-reviewed, others were of a more popular nature and interest. For the purposes of accreditation, all articles had to be peer-reviewed.

Jewish Affairs has become an indispensable

Cedric Ginsberg, a frequent contributor to and long-serving member of the editorial board of Jewish Affairs, has taught Jewish Studies at Wits and Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Unisa. He teaches Yiddish at the Hebrew Academy at the Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre in Johannesburg.

resource for any study of the South African Jewish historical or literary experience. It provides a central forum for the expression of the rich diversity of South African Jewish life, encapsulating the essence of this vibrant community, and it has an immense cultural impact and importance. There is no doubt that the years during which Joseph Sherman stood at its helm, contributed immensely to the enhancement of this fine image.

Joseph was passionate about literature and the theatre. It was in the field of Yiddish literature, however, that his primary focus lay, and he became a world-renowned expert on the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer. His training ground was South African Yiddish literature. His uncle J. M. Sherman, was a Yiddish writer who was immersed in the South African Yiddish literary world. Joseph translated many stories written in Yiddish by local writers and published them in *From a Land Far Off* in 1987. He worked with Woolf Levick and Dovid Fram on these translations and learnt a great deal from them about the rich Lithuanian backdrop against which the stories were set. This book was a pioneering work because it introduced local Yiddish writing to the English reader for the first time.

Joseph expressed his regard for the importance of the local Yiddish literary output by introducing new contributors to the journal who wrote on the topic. Three articles have been chosen and reprinted in this issue to give readers a glimpse of the extent of his interest in this concern and the importance of this literature for Jewish culture in South Africa. The first is Astrid Starck's *South African Yiddish Literature and the Problem of Apartheid*, an important essay in that it gives an overview of the extent of South African Yiddish writing. The essay reviews an anthology (called *Doremafrikanish*) of local writing published as part of an extended series of nearly 100 volumes encompassing world Yiddish literature. The editor of *Doremafrikanish*, Shmuel Rozhansky, selected the works of South African Yiddish writers which appeared in Yiddish newspapers and journals from 1904 until 1971, when the anthology was published. Most English readers were amazed to discover the richness of the poetry and prose writing. These writings reflect discussion of identity, racial discrimination and the alienation of the *griner* (new immigrant) in a new and seemingly hostile environment. Joseph also published in *Jewish Affairs* several new translations of South African Yiddish stories in order to extend and reinforce the knowledge and interest of the readership.

The second article is the text of an interview

Joseph conducted with Levi Shalit ('South Africa's Last Yiddish Newspaper: An Interview with Levi Shalit'), editor of the *Afrikaner Idish Tsaytung* over a period of thirty years, from 1954-1985. Shalit was a Holocaust survivor, and was strongly pro-Zionist. Despite the fact that many secular Yiddish cultural activists were ambivalent towards Israel (particularly up to the late 1950s), the Yiddish weekly appeared regularly. The paper contained news from the Jewish world as well as frequent editorial comment from Shalit on the issues of the day.

The third article ('The Irony of Faith: Sholom Aleichem's *Dreyfus in Kasrilevke*') expresses the concern with a broader interest in the classic writings in Yiddish. The trials of Alfred Dreyfus, an officer in the French army who in 1894 was charged with treason, reverberated throughout Europe. In this story, Sholom Aleichem describes in his inimical way how news of the trial reached the fictitious shtetl of Kasrilevke. Only one person in town subscribed to the Hebrew-language newspaper *Ha-Tsfirah*, and he was thus the source of all the international news. The Dreyfus trial, with its intrigue, subterfuge, cover-ups and libellous and baseless accusations against the accused, was difficult for sophisticated city people to fathom. How much more confusing was the 'Affair' in the shtetl, where there was but one incomplete source of news? In this article, Sherman brilliantly and perceptively analysed the impact the trial had on these small-town Jews who understood so little about international politics.

These articles were selected because it was considered that they were representative of the broad spectrum of Yiddish activity in South Africa. They reflect the editor's deep interest in these matters and demonstrate an important way in which his influence on the journal manifested itself. A select bibliography of articles related to aspects Yiddish interest published during Joseph's term as editor has also been appended at the end of this introduction. This list gives a fuller picture of the variety and extent of the importance of the role that Yiddish played in the journal.

Bibliography of selected articles of Yiddish interest appearing in *Jewish Affairs* during the editorship of Joseph Sherman

Boiskin, Jonathan, *Beinkinstadt's 1903-1993*, Spring, 1993 pp. 39-42.

Chai, Solly, "Mit harts un gefil" - *An appreciation of Mordkhe Gebirtig (1877-1942)*, August, 1995 pp. 25-31.

Dubb, Lillian, *Hidden Treasures: Our South African Yiddish Heritage*, Spring, 1993

Elder, Glen S., *Decolonising the 'Kaffir': a Geographical Analysis of two South African Yiddish Stories*, Spring, 1997 pp. 53-57.

Feldman, Richard, *The Kaffireatnik*, Winter, 1997 pp. 28-33 (Translated by Joseph Sherman).

The White Kaffir, Spring, 1997 pp. 58-63 (Translated by Joseph Sherman).

Fleisher, Tova, *A Hebrew view of South African Blacks in the Thirties*, Winter, 1995 pp. 35-38.

Ginsberg, Cedric, *Reclaiming a South African Yiddish Text: Shmuel Leibowitz's 'Vayse Kaffirs'*, Spring 1997 pp. 73-79.

Leibowitz, Shmuel, *White Kaffirs*, Spring 1997, pp. 64-72 (Translated by Joseph Sherman, presented with the Yiddish text, reconstructed from the original handwritten Ms and the text as first published in *Foroys*, July 1937).

Levinsky, Nehemiah, *The Rains Came Late*, Winter, 1995 pp. 46-49.

McCormick, Kay, *Yiddish in District Six*, Spring, 1993 pp. 29-38.

Sherman, Jacob Mordechai, *Usibebu-John Goes Home*, Summer, 1990, pp. 56-57, (Translated by Joseph Sherman).

Sherman, Joseph, 'Singing with the Silence': *The Poetry of David Fram*, September/October, 1988, pp. 39-44.

_____, *South Africa's Last Yiddish Newspaper: An Interview with Levi Shalit*, Spring, 1993 pp. 49-54.

_____, *The Irony of Faith: Sholom Aleichem's 'Dreyfus in Kasrilevke'*, Summer, 1994 pp. 35-39.

Starck, Astrid, *South African Yiddish Literature and the Problem of Apartheid*, Winter, 1995 pp. 39-45.

_____, *Apartheid and the Yiddish Novel: Faivl Zygielboim's 'The Uhamas' (1971)*, Summer, 1996, pp. 49-55.

_____, *Old Home vs Land of Opportunity: Interrogating 'Home' and 'Exile' in Rakhmiel Feldman's 'Trayers'*, Spring, 1997, pp. 79-84.

Zygielbaum, Reuven, *Under godless skies*, Spring, 1998, pp. 25-27.



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SOUTH AFRICAN YIDDISH LITERATURE AND THE PROBLEM OF APARTHEID

*

Astrid Starck¹

(First published *Jewish Affairs*, Winter, 1995. Translated from the French by Karen-Anne Durbach)

In 1971, an anthology of writings entitled 'In South Africa' appeared in Buenos Aires². It forms the fiftieth volume of the series, 'Models of Yiddish Literature', published by YIVO, the Yiddish Research Institute in Argentina

Consisting of articles, extracts from novels, and poems written in South Africa, this anthology was compiled to offer a composite view of this unique body of Yiddish creativity. At the end of the volume is a selection of essays on both literary and socio-political topics by a variety of South African Yiddish writers and critics. This volume made accessible for the first time to the international Yiddish-reading public a representative sample of the range and variety of South African Yiddish writing. Indeed, the extracts published provide information on its origins and its evolution, on its different literary periods and on the individual authors and their work.³ However, they also emphasise the fact that these examples can only be seen as initial pointers to a far deeper study still awaiting investigation.

It is important to bear in mind that the South African Yiddish writers represented here do not regard the literature they have produced as a phenomenon unfolding in isolation. Rather we must re-situate it in its multilingual context and appreciate it in a comparative way.⁴ First, the influence of Eastern European Yiddish literature and its leading exponents, especially that of Yitskhok Leib Peretz, is central. In talking of Yiddish writing, too, we are discussing young literature, since its formative modern writers date only from the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Yiddish was the language of Ashkenazi Jews—the Jews living in Western and Eastern Europe—and first developed in German-speaking areas, only later moving to Slavic-speaking areas. Spoken by thirteen million people before World War 2, Yiddish was irreparably diminished after the Holocaust.

The anthology under discussion here covers a period from 1904⁵ to 1971⁶—effectively from the beginning to the end of Yiddish literary activity in South Africa, since 1904 was the year in which the first weekly Yiddish newspaper appeared in the Cape.⁷ These seven decades correspond to the different stages of international literary production in Yiddish, the most productive period of which was unquestionably the era between the two wars. Most of the texts collected here were first published in the Yiddish periodical press in Johannesburg before appearing in book form, either in Johannesburg or Cape Town for South Africa, or in Vilna or Warsaw

for Europe.⁸ The writers represented were almost all born at the end of the nineteenth or at the beginning of the twentieth century. By virtue of its language, this anthology stands as a benchmark of Yiddish writing as world literature; by virtue of its thematic and geographical framework, it forms part of the multilingual literary impulse of South Africa.

The texts are grouped in chapters according to themes that reflect either the history of immigrant Jews who came to South Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century, fleeing the pogroms of Tsarist Russia, or reflect the history of their new country of refuge and its society. Generally speaking, most of these immigrants originally hailed from Lithuania. After World War 1 they developed in South Africa a lively Yiddish cultural life and literature, which, though linked to the literary and political developments in their home country, nevertheless found a particular and individualistic South African tone. There was a very active press most of the stories were first published in newspapers. The literature includes themes of great diversity, while its active theatre companies included in their repertoire plays originally written in Yiddish as well as Yiddish translations of classical or modern European works. To my knowledge there does not exist any intensive study on these different aspects; though known and appreciated in its time, South African Yiddish literature is hardly explored today.⁹

The writers themselves, only some of whom are listed in the most comprehensive modern dictionary of Yiddish authors,¹⁰ have contributed handsomely to the rise of Yiddish literature in South Africa; they bring to life characters of different class origins and very different social backgrounds: the Boers, the English, the Jews, the coloureds, the blacks. The chief Jewish characters are those who have just arrived in a strange world and who remember with or without nostalgia the Home Country and members of their family left behind, or those who, in an effort to find employment, struggle in the same daily misery as they did in the country they have just left; also presented are those who gradually succeeded in making a competent living, even though they remain outcasts in the wider social world they inhabit. The marginalization of the white man in this white society is caused either by his egalitarian attitude towards the black population – he acts fairly and nobly towards black workers,¹¹ behaviour regarded as undermining the hegemony of the white ruling class¹² – or as a result of his own lifestyle through marriage to, or life shared with, a black woman.¹³

Extensively dramatized is the marginalization imposed on the Jewish immigrants by the wider white population, which aims to exclude yet another category of human beings. A large percentage of South African Yiddish writings and poems have as their themes interracial contacts or tensions,¹⁴ relationships that the Yiddish writers, belonging themselves to an oppressed minority, knew in Europe and from which they were not completely sheltered in South Africa.¹⁵ The problems of this multiracial society are evoked in a long epic poem entitled *Baym rand fun gold* (1966), in which the evil institution of apartheid is attacked.¹⁶

Often the experience of the Home Country is juxtaposed against that of South Africa as a basic point of comparison, or as a striking parallel relevant to the time, or as a reflection of the resultant tragedy, for after 1945 the Jewish 'Home Country' was wiped out by the Nazis. In his article on 'The Yiddish Literary Contribution of South Africa: Heritage and Influences', David Fram, himself both a writer and a poet,¹⁷ despairs that one of the South African Yiddish novels that he cites, *In Land fun gold un zunshayn* (In the Land of Gold and Sunshine) by Jacob Mordechai Sherman¹⁸ reflects Lithuania more strongly than the warmth of South Africa.¹⁹ Several other writers dwell on their country of birth far more eagerly once they have left it.

My examination will focus on those writings found in the third section of the anthology under the title *Tsvishn vays un shvarts* (Between White and Black). In particular it emphasizes the writing of Rachmiel Feldman, author of the collection of short stories entitled *Shvarts un vays* (Black and White), first published in Warsaw in 1935 and re-issued in New York in 1957,²⁰ and on those of Nehemiah Levinsky, author of the anthology *Der regn hot farshpetikt* (The Rains Came Late), first published in Bloemfontein in 1959 but including earlier writings.²¹ Two stories of each author have been included in the anthology: Feldman's *Yan un piet* and *Ya, baas*, and Levinsky's *Der regn hot farshpetikt* and *Gebitn dem nomen*. In addition, I shall examine some of Feldman's writings published in his own collection.

Within what literary framework can these stories be classified? Inspired by the naturalism of the 19th Century, they also give expression to the search for, or the loss of, identity so central to the literature of the beginning of the 20th Century. Their message is that of the Enlightenment: the right to education and equality among people that will allow each individual to experience a better life. In this respect they are at one with the Yiddish writing from Eastern Europe. Later, both in Europe and South Africa, a new theme is developed: the organization of the masses and the drive towards freedom from bondage and exploitation, either in the country or in the town. The tales under discussion here are built on the framework of the historical, social and racial situation of South Africa, one difficult for the 'poor whites',²² but inhuman for blacks. Their writers wanted to alert their Yiddish readers to the injustice and inequality so prevalent in South African society. Emphasis is

placed on the insecure conditions under which their black protagonists exist all the time, and their total destitution when they live in the city where, totally isolated, they are subject to the whims of white people. The transition from the country to the town, from traditional to modern ways of life, the problems of assimilation or of marginalisation, are all explored. The weight of South African political and social institutions is depicted in a Kafkaesque manner, including both absurdity and tragedy, and sometimes even the grotesque.²³ Whatever the protagonists do or do not do, they cannot protect themselves from a fate over which they have no control and which has determined to crush them. This theme is what links these stories to the work of Peretz, for example, who describes the pathetic and miserable lives of small and poor people, subjected to a merciless destiny that leaves them no hope.

An Inhuman Reality

In his story *Der regn hot farshpetikt* (The Rains Came Late), the writer Nehemiah Levinsky, 'Yiddish spokesman of the black man and of his life',²⁴ describes a man called Joseph who loses his job because of the drought. Joseph's Jewish employer, Solomon, who runs a little shop and owns a patch of land, dismisses him while waiting for the rains when, he promises, he will take him back. Solomon himself dreams of leaving his small shop in order to devote himself to farming his land.²⁵ For three months Joseph is unemployed. He is dying of hunger. One evening, aroused by the barking of a dog, he goes outside and finds the dog has killed a sheep next to his hut. He eats some of this dead sheep, but tries to dispose of the carcass so that he will not be accused of theft and of slaughter. He is stopped by a policeman, beaten, and taken to be jailed. En route, the policeman stops at the trader's stall; the trader recognises his former employee, covered with blood. He knows that he is innocent, but he can do nothing for him. Ironically, that very night it starts to rain again.

The situation of the different characters is metaphorically illustrated by the rain. For Solomon, the trader, the rain is synonymous with a better future; for the policeman, it is simply foul weather in which he has to work: it increases his cruelty towards Joseph, whom he holds responsible for everything. For Joseph, finally, and for him alone, the events unfold in all their absurdity. Surely it is significant that this Joseph is given a first name that recalls Kafka's victim? This moment of the coming of the rain, so long awaited, is now stripped of meaning: it simply defines the authoritarian behaviour to which Joseph is subjected. On to this natural occurrence, over which man has no control, is grafted human violence. Faced with these two situations, Joseph is powerless. Rain as the harbinger of discrimination against blacks is also emphasised in the story 'Ja, Baas'. When farm workers ask to be paid for their labour in order to return home, their employer deducts the rainy days – when working was impossible – from their wages. Since even half a day of rain counts

for a full day, the length of docked time is so high that by the end of the calculations, the labourers end up owing money to their employer. The police, to whom they turn for justice but who are in collusion with the white farmers, order them to return to work so that they can repay their debts; to prevent them from escaping, they are beaten. Is it a greater crime to break one's contract, or to owe money to one's master?²⁶

In these stories, where the omniscient narrator slides into the skin of his characters, the emphasis is placed primarily on *the dehumanising world of work*, either in the fields or in the mines, *on the lonely world of men* – the number of women is minimal and generally they are peripheral figures – and *on the hostile and cruel universe of the whites*, both in the town and in the country, who know nothing about the traditional world of the village. The characters of the tales have a multiple identity: they are simultaneously part of the traditional world and part of the modern world, and they live a see-saw existence between the two. Having come from the villages to labour on the farms, on the mines or as servants-of-all-work, they remain for longer or shorter periods earning money with which to support their families who have remained in the original rural areas, or to save enough for a dowry so that they can get married.²⁷ Every three years, both motives lead these men to leave home for several months, and then return. The time they spend in the working world is painful and often fatal: either a man falls ill and returns to his village to die there,²⁸ or is imprisoned or killed.²⁹

In 'The Checked Jacket', Jackson, the oldest son of his family, must work as a 'kitchen boy' in Johannesburg to replace his dead father as the breadwinner of his family. But he is imprisoned: in order to avoid humiliation in the eyes of her neighbours, a white woman accuses him unjustly. All this is a result of his 'checked jacket', a garment that he had just acquired and that people said suited him so well. *Dos gekestele rekl* (The Checked Jacket) well illustrates Feldman's writing technique: it has a dramatic intensity, it is short, and the description is graphic and suggestive. Aggressiveness or bald statement of fact is followed by sentimentality. An analysis of social issues is made through the reactions of the characters. Through the juxtaposition of telling clauses or phrases the author succeeds in creating critical tension. Every day, the 'criminals' are brought to court. In order to do this, it is necessary to stop the traffic: on Monday, the first day after the weekend, the procession is even more spectacular and the crowd, watching all these handcuffed people pass, whisper to each other with shivers of terror: 'So many criminals? Others 'think it is good that the law is so vigilant: that gives the citizens a feeling of security'. Among these prisoners is Jackson, who was preparing to leave the world of the whites permanently in order to go and 'live as a man among men, as his father did and his father's father'.

After his inexplicable arrest, the two worlds he inhabits collide: the white world immediately becomes instinct with the emanation of the ancestral

spirits of his village which have come to punish him – but for what? Because his experience revolves around various levels of incomprehensible elements, it is consequently hostile. When Jackson is released after three years and his clothes are returned to him, the warders do not understand why he refuses to take his jacket back: 'They do not know that in each check is hidden an evil spirit and that these spirits had played a terrible game with him.'³⁰

Like the rain in the previous tale, the jacket becomes a metaphor that allows different readings of the text. If in the beginning it situates Jackson directly within his surroundings, it quickly becomes fatal for him both in the white world and in his own. It serves as a vision at once anthropomorphic and surrealist, depending on whichever world one situates oneself; it illustrates the alienation and the foreignness of the individual against whom it discriminates blindly. One might respond to this story as the reverse of a myth: in effect, in myths, clothes allow for invisibility and allow the hero to escape from danger. Here, one is left with total loss of identity.

Origin as an Insurmountable Force

Identity is made to define itself only according to the terms of the individual's area of origin, a place that, mentioned repeatedly, is made the antithesis of the hostile world of work in the white world.³¹ This world is synonymous with hell. The workers, who seem to come from beyond, gather there with burnt-out expressions like shadows round a dead body.³² The narrative voice in 'Masika the Night Watchman' articulates this vision of two worlds, the latter different and perverted: 'The world of the whites was for [Masika] an upside down world'³³ because the white world is the world of the night, where the black world is the world of the day. Masika understands nothing about the world of the whites. Moreover, while they are apparently at war (the story is set during World War 1), do they at least know why and for what they are fighting? Masika had lived for years among the whites, but their way of life interested him very little. In addition, although he understands what is said to him, Masika only speaks his native tongue, Zulu: the whites speak to each other in their language – either English or Afrikaans – but address him in Zulu, since they would be hostile to any attempt on the part of an African to speak a 'white' language. In dress, Masika has adopted a personal and harmonious symbiosis between traditional Zulu ornaments and European-style clothing: he wears wooden rings in his ears and an assortment of waistcoats with a shirt hanging over his trousers, always barefooted and never jacketed. Life with his family in the country is the opposite of his life in the city: there he finds harmony, slowness, discussion, and meaningful human relationships, all absent from the gold mine on which he earns his money. These evocations are brief, forming a background that serves as a memory of the past or a vision of the future, but is the reverse of the real situation in the present. The tribal world, the world of the village is, as noted, a world that one

either leaves or to which one returns. One is always en route to it, one is never there.

In Samuel Leibowitz's *Mkize*,³⁴ a young black man is impatient to seek work in the city, and his mother gives him last-minute advice before he arrives at the station after a long walk. The landscape he is so anxious to leave behind is barely mentioned. In Chaim Sacks's *Der boss un johanes* (The Boss and Johannes)³⁵ Johannes returns home after long years spent toiling in the city, but after all those years he feels himself a stranger in the country. His entire family has disappeared. He returns to his 'location' where he feels at home and where he is going to practice his vocation as a pastor. In Fayvl Zygielboim's *Di uhamas*,³⁶ Bennet returns to his village to encourage its inhabitants to rid themselves of their superstitions and come to work in town. In Feldman's *Der vayser kafer* (The White Kaffir),³⁷ the hero, an aristocratic Englishman, forsakes his home country for Africa. After long travels and different trades he settles in Swaziland with his black bride. Descriptions of the landscape, the evocation of children and adults who sing and dance should give a depth to the reality of life. But these are too concise and too stereotypical. No one really ever again finds the country he has left; the one in which he exists from day to day, by contrast, is ever-present. The different black characters in these tales consequently live in a no-man's land, perpetually searching for an identity.

The Displaced Person, or the Identity Questioned

The dissensions and divisions at the heart of a society predicated on a racist and antisemitic ideology are exposed through the names of the characters. One's name is the 'entrance ticket into social acceptance'.³⁸ 'A name is the tiniest gift that a man possesses,' says the narrator in 'The boss and Johannes'.³⁹ This recognition is made the theme of Levinsky's *Gebitn dem nomen* (Changed his Name)⁴⁰ in which two characters, otherwise totally sundered, find themselves united under the most ironic circumstances: a coloured man with an African name, and a Jew with an unmistakably Eastern European name are both forced into collision with the social formation because of these very surnames. Their destinies unfold in a parallel way. This story develops a theme that will recur in 'The White Kaffir' – that of a mixed marriage between a Jew and a Christian – and in *Di kam alts eydes* (The Comb as Witness)⁴¹ which deals with a coloured man with a European name who loses in his rights. 'Changed his Name' is the story of Johannes, a small-time coloured hawker of fruit and vegetables who travels round to his customers' houses and ekes out an uncertain livelihood. Because of his name, he collides head-on with the absurdity of the racial situation in South Africa. He would like his son to attend a school in order to get the necessary education to enable him to avoid his father's miserable fate. The first school, in which his illiterate father wants to enrol him, refuses

little Jimmy, because although the boy has a light skin, like his father, he bears the surname of his maternal family, an African name, Mokatlane. The second, a school for black children, advises the father against putting his son there: he would be exposed to the ridicule of his fellow students. Desperate, the father returns home. Some time later, Johannes speaks about his dilemma to one of his white customers, Evelyn, who advises him to put his son into a Catholic mission school, but the father does not want his son to change his religion. At the same time, Evelyn's husband, a Jewish bank employee, has already changed his first name of 'Chaim' to 'Kenneth' in order to be treated with more respect at work and to have chances of promotion. Although she is practicing Catholic, Evelyn, the Aryan, has agreed to marry her husband on condition that their children are brought up as Catholics. Because of this, Kenneth has been rejected by his family. One lovely day, an overjoyed Johannes Mokatlane comes to see Evelyn and shows her a cutting from the Government Gazette that publishes announcements of official changes of name. She reads:

I, Johannes Mokatlane, coloured dealer in fruit and vegetables, apply to the Government to change my name Mokatlane to the name of my father Matthew, who was a white man. I wish to change my present name because it sounds like the name of a black man, for which reason I cannot enrol my children in a school for coloureds. Secondly, because of his light complexion, my son will not be accepted in a school for blacks.

Reading a little further on, Evelyn's attention is attracted by another insert:

I, Kenneth (Chaim) Babentchinsky, a bank employee, wish to change my name to Bell, firstly because I do not belong to the Jewish community; secondly, my wife is a Christian and my present name causes her unpleasantness.

An individual's name can also be that which differentiates and sunders from each other children of the same parents. In Feldman's 'The Comb as Witness', Edward Fraser is a young coloured who has been educated in a mission school, and then trained to be a carpenter. He has taken the name of his father, James Fraser, even though his brothers and sisters, all of whom are black, bear their mother's name, Dinaka. Edward severs all ties with his mother and the rest of his family. Through his marriage to Martha, an educated coloured woman, he tries to integrate into the coloured society of Cape Town. Then he returns to Johannesburg where his brother, Tommy Dinaka, formerly a teacher but now a staunch trade unionist and member of the African National Congress, finds him again after several attempts.⁴² Edward is shocked, and receives his brother with

great uneasiness, desperately anxious that his wife should never see them together. As a result of this meeting, however, and in consequence of the Population Registration Act of 1956, which demanded the exact racial classification of all South Africans, Edward is reclassified as black. His wife, horrified at the social degradation she now faces, takes their children and leaves him to return to Cape, because she refuses to accept for her children the appalling future reserved for blacks. Edward takes his case on appeal to the Race Classification Board, where the court passes a comb through his frizzy hair to prove that he is black. With the help of a lawyer, who produces the certificate of the legal marriage between his mother and an Englishman, Edward regains his status as a coloured. He immediately leaves Johannesburg for the Cape with the intention of finding his wife and family in order to tell them the good news, but she and his children have completely disappeared.

If the characters discussed up until now have 'chosen' their names, this does not eliminate the situation of some others who are burdened with a nickname that depersonalises or dehumanises them. This is the situation of a young child who comes to the city with his mother and to whom the pass-office official gives the name of 'Tickey', an old threepenny bit, the smallest denomination of South African coinage, explaining to the mother that in order to enter white society, every black person needs a suitable (white) name.⁴³ In his feverish condition, the child hears this name echo like the ticking of a clock mechanical, itself soulless but with the power to seal human destiny. In the same category a Zulu worker, whose first name is Johannes, has his identity erased by a taller fellow worker of the same name who stigmatizes him with the sobriquet 'Sixpence' because of his short stature.⁴⁴ Short Johannes cannot cope with the shame of this public insult from a fellow black; significantly, it hardly matters that the whites call him by that moniker, since he has no real interaction with them.

In the same way as the individual's place of birth defines the process of self-identity, so an individual's name reveals characteristics of the absurd and is made grotesque: it introduces a sharp division of self into the heart of the individual.

The Identity Rediscovered

If most of the stories in this anthology describe a situation of powerlessness and desperation, they also include a marked eschatological dimension. This dimension has three degrees: *tragic*, in which the story ends with the death or imprisonment of the main character; *prospective*, in which one of the children is destined to succeed in escaping his pre-ordained social role; or *eschatological*, in which future generations will enjoy a better fate. Either willingly or unwillingly, this is linked to a crisis of conscience and emanates from the decision of the chief character to react to his seemingly unavoidable lot. Masika the night watchman is much undecided

about what his attitude should be during the miners' strike. But he is certain of one thing: he will not help the police against his own people. At the end, he finds himself in the front line of the protest and is killed by bullets. The tribal stick that he held in his hand becomes for the oppressors conclusive evidence of a bloody, violent and murderous attitude on the part of the protestors.⁴⁵ Piet Ndali, a worker beyond reproach, has aroused the hatred of his racist boss, Hendrik Lasthausen, in consequence of his total innocence. He is finally destroyed by Lasthausen when the latter learns that he has joined the committee of the agricultural workers' union.⁴⁶ Bennet is killed after he has walked into the road to protest against apartheid.⁴⁷ Piet is led to prison on Dingaan's Day as a result of his protest against the pass system.⁴⁸ Time spent in prison is the shared fate of everyone who opposes unjust and discriminatory situations. Thus Edward Fraser, the coloured, initially only knows his black brother, Tommy, from press reports of his frequent imprisonments. Edward will end by clinging to his reactionary revised ideas about racial discrimination, and will lose his wife and his children in consequence.

Certain characters hope for a change as a result of their personal circumstances. They think that through education, their children will be able to rise in the social hierarchy. This is the situation of Johannes Mokatlane, who saves every cent to buy his son education, just as he had earlier saved every cent to buy the hand-cart from which he earns his living, only to encounter the rejections already noted.⁴⁹ In 'The White Kaffir', this idea is represented in an eschatological vision based on the idea of a saviour or a redeemer through whose instrumentality the liberation of the black people will occur. One can call it messianic. The 'white kaffir', who bears no other surname and who has for many years been outcast from society because he has married a Swazi woman, imagines in several recurring dreams the future of his youngest son Tommy, either as a miner, an agricultural worker, or a 'boy', all images that are totally unacceptable to him. Then he imagines him leading a large black protest, shaking off the yoke of the whites, just like the heroes of the liberation struggle. For Feldman, a politically committed writer, this text, placed at the end of his collection, can perhaps be regarded as his message. Moreover, since it is the longest story and involves a lengthy historical picture of South Africa presented through its principal character, it is the only tale that ends with a glimmer of hope.

This study has attempted to consider South African Yiddish literature as reflections, and within the perspective, of racial and political discrimination and its repercussions on social behaviour. Such an examination reveals a politically committed literature that, if it does not entirely avoid certain clichés – which are much more evident for women, but that is not our concern here – offers up an interesting manifestation of artistic creativity both on a literary level and on the level of ideas.

Editor's Note: Many of the stories discussed in this essay have been published in English translation, together with a detailed introduction to the history and development of South African Yiddish literature, in Sherman, J. (trans. and ed.) *From a Land Far Off, Cape Town 1987*.

NOTES

- 1 At the time of writing this article, Astrid Starck was Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, University of Haute Alsace, France, where she taught and researched Yiddish literature.
- 2 Rozhansky, S. (ed.) *Antologie: Dorem-afrikanish. Musterverkfun der yidisher literatur*, Vol. 50. Buenos Aires, 1971
- 3 'Tsu der kharakteristik fun dorem-afrikanish', Section 6 in *Antologie*, pp.296-357.
- 4 By examining it in relation to, for example, the novels written in English by SA writers who deal with inter-racial relationships and with the evils of apartheid, like Sara Gertrude Millin, William Plomer, Alan Paton, Laurens van der Post, Nadine Gordimer, Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele. This is only a brief list.
- 5 Matuson, J., *Dos yidishe lebn in afrike*. Warsaw, 1904.
- 6 Zygielboim, F., *Di uhamas*. Tel-Aviv, 1971.
- 7 *Der yidisher advokat*, edited by David Goldblatt. This newspaper appeared until 1914.
- 8 It is not always easy to establish the date of the first appearance of a text because the publication date is not always given in the book itself.
- 9 Wolpe, D. 'Yiddish loshn un vortshafung in dorem-Afrike', *Antologie*, p.313.
- 10 *Leksikon fun der nayer yiddisher literatur*. 8 vols. New York, 1956.
- 11 See Tabatznik, M. 'In a "pey-dey" in kaferita', *Antologie*, pp.147-58. This is an extract from his largely autobiographical novel *Kalman Bulan*, 3 vols. Johannesburg, 1968-1971. It is published in an English Translation under the title 'Eating-House Payday'. See Editor's Note. Mendel Tabatznik (1894-1975) was born in Kletsk, Byelorussia. He was trained as a teacher of Yiddish and directed plays. In 1927 he emigrated to South Africa, and became a leading figure in the Yiddish cultural life of Johannesburg.
- 12 See Plomer, W., *Turbot Wolfe* (125). In this novel, written in English, the chief character, who treats blacks as equals, attracts the hostility of white society.
- 13 In *Turbot Wolfe*, again, the deep love between a white man and black woman calls attention to the fundamental attitude of the whites for whom it can only be a short-lived distraction.
- 14 'Tsvishn vays un shvarts', Section 3 in *Antologie*, pp.116-92.
- 15 See Levinsky, N. 'Gebitn dem nomen', *Antologie*, pp.175-86. In this story, the protagonist seeks to have his name changed because his Jewish surname prevents him from rising in the social hierarchy.
- 16 See Berger, N., 'A shtot vakst', extract from his epic poem *Baymrandfun gold* (Johannesburg, 1966), *Antologie*, pp.158-62.
- 17 David Fram (1903-1988), one of the first South African Yiddish poets to achieve international recognition, was born in Lithuania and emigrated to South Africa in 1927. His first book of verse, *Lider un poemes*, was published in Vilna in 1931.
- 18 J.M. Sherman was born in Lithuania in 1885 and died in Johannesburg in 1958. In 1903 he immigrated to South Africa and is considered one of the founders of Yiddish literature in this country. His novel *In land fun gold un zunshayn*, the first novel in South African Yiddish writing, was published in Johannesburg in 1956.
- 19 See Fram, D. 'Yerushe un hashpoes in yidishn vort-tsushtayer fun dorem-afrike', *Antologie*, p.319
- 20 Rachmiel (Richard) Feldman published *Trayers*, another anthology containing a play, several stories and some essays, in 1945. Feldman (1897-1968) was born in Lithuania but emigrated with his parents to South Africa in 1910 at the age of thirteen. He published in a wide variety of South African literary journals in both Yiddish and English. He became a prominent member of the South African Labour Party and served as Labour's representative on the Transvaal Provincial Council for eleven years from 1943 to 1954. He translated some of the work of I.L. Peretz into English. His own major work was his volume of short stories, *Shvarts un vays*, first published in Warsaw in 1935, and republished in 1957 by the Central Yiddish Cultural Organisation (CYCO) in New York, with a dust cover designed by Irma Stern. With an entire section of new 'race tales' (as Feldman called them) added, this was the only volume of South African Yiddish stories ever to achieve a second edition. The basic theme of all Feldman's work is the crucial problem of race relations in South Africa.
- 21 Levinsky, N. (1901-1957), *Der regn hot farshpetikt*, a volume of short stories published posthumously in Bloemfontein in 1959. After his university studies in Kovno in Lithuania, Levinsky emigrated to South Africa in 1921. Having settled in Bloemfontein, he and his brother, together with Woolf Levick, became the co-founders of the Bloemfontein Yiddish Cultural Circle. Levinsky's writings, the first of which, 'Der kund', dates from 1938, first appeared in such early SA Yiddish journals as *Faroyts* and *Dorem-afrike*, and were collected in book form after his death. The title story of this collection is included in *Antologie*, pp.124-33, and was published in English translation for the first time in this issue of *Jewish Affairs*.
- 22 In his story 'Tiki', Feldman evokes a society in which South Africa's diverse population groups, sharing nothing but suffering in common, are brought together: 'There were blacks of different tribal origins, and there were also Indians, "coloureds", and some "poor whites".' See his anthology *Shvarts un vays*, p.77
- 23 For example, several stories stress the necessity, imposed by the white administration, for people to change the indigenous names. This cultural imperialism is investigated further later in my paper
- 24 See Wolpe, D., 'A yidisher dertseyler vegn shvartsn mentshn un zany lebn', *Yontev-bleter*, Jhb, May 1960.
- 25 This characteristic, largely absent from the Yiddish literature of Eastern Europe, is in line with the Zionist ideological dream of returning to the ancestral Land of Israel and to the tilling of the earth, work forbidden to Jews through many centuries.
- 26 Feldman, R., 'Ya, baas', *Antologie*, p.136.
- 27 Feldman, 'Karbid-ash', *Shvarts un vays*, p62. The father of a daughter in this tale demands that a young man give twenty-five oxen as a dowry immediately and on the spot.
- 28 Feldman, *Karbid-ash*.
- 29 Feldman, 'Tiki', *Shvarts un vays*, p76. In response to the

- uprising of white workers in Johannesburg in 1913, the police shoot at the crowd, in the process killing black people who happen to get in the way. Without doubt, this is what happened to Tickey's father, classified 'disappeared' just at that turbulent time. Masika the night watchman, due to return to Zululand, is killed as he marches in a demonstration in support of a miners' wage increase: see Feldman, 'Masika der nakhtvekhter', in *Shvarts un vays*, p34.
- 30 Feldman, 'Dos gekestlte rekl,' *Shvarts un vays*, pp.17-23.
- 31 This is also the theme developed by David Zhager in his poem, 'Johannesburg', *Antologie*, pp.122-24.
- 32 Feldman, *Karbid-ash*, p28.
- 33 Feldman, 'Masika der nakhtvekhter', pp27-28.
- 34 Leibowitz, S. (1912-1976), 'Mkize', *Antologie*, pp141-46. Leibowitz immigrated to South Africa in 1929, and began writing stories in Yiddish soon after, publishing locally in journals like *Faroys* from 1931 onwards. His considerable output was never assembled in book form, and must be sought in ephemeral South Africa publications.
- 35 Sacks, C. (1891-1981), 'Der boss un johannes', *Antologie*, pp. 163-74. Translated into English as 'Sweets from Sixpence'. See Editor's Note.
- 36 Zygielboim, F., *Di uhamas* a novel published in Tel Aviv in 1971. An extract from this novel, which constitutes the latest text, is found in *Antologie*, pp.187-92.
- 37 Feldman, 'Der vayser kafer', *Shvarts un vays*, pp.79-96.
- 38 This is how Heine spoke of conversion, which permitted Jews to enter those professions that would otherwise have been closed to them during the 19th Century.
- 39 Sacks, Ch., *Der boss un Johannes*, p169.
- 40 Levinsky, N, 'Gebtin dem nomen', *Antologie*, pp175-86. See Editor's Note.
- 41 Feldman, 'Di kam alts eydes', *Shvarts un vays*, pp35-48.
- 42 'Tommy made enquiries in a furniture factory in order to know whether they had a worker with the name "Edward Fraser". But the white clerks did not want to take the trouble of looking through the files of their workers. In one of the factories, an employee asked him jokingly if he were looking for "Sir" or "Lord" Fraser' (translated by Joseph Sherman), 'Di kam alts eydes', p41.
- 43 Feldman, *Tiki*, p78
- 44 Sacks 'Der boss un johannes', p169.
- 45 Feldman, 'Masika der nakhtvekhter', pp27-28.
- 46 Feldman, 'Ya baas', p136.
- 47 Zygielboim, *Di uhamas*, pp187-92
- 48 Feldman, 'Jan un piet', pp117-22.
- 49 Levinsky, *Gebtin dem nomen*, pp175-86.

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SOUTH AFRICA'S LAST YIDDISH NEWSPAPER: AN INTERVIEW WITH LEVI SHALIT

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The history of the Yiddish press in South Africa goes back over a century. The country's first Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner Israelit*, was found in Johannesburg in 1890 by Nehemiah Dov Ber Hoffman, who had the extraordinary foresight to bring with him a full set of Hebrew-Yiddish type when he immigrated to South Africa from Neustadt-Sugind. This first newspaper, like its many successors both in Johannesburg and the Cape, were very short-lived, but Hoffman continued to be associated with them all for many years.

After the creation of the Union a new Yiddish weekly, *Der Afrikaner*, was founded in Johannesburg in November 1911 by Solomon Fogelson, and despite the fact that there were at least three other flourishing Yiddish periodicals being published in South Africa at the same time, this paper outlived all of them – and indeed, its founder editor himself – surviving for over twenty years. This remarkable achievement was owing entirely to the tireless efforts of its chief contributor and second editor, Hyman Polsky.

By the early 1930s, many local Yiddish writers were encouraged to feel that there might be a strong enough readership to maintain a Yiddish daily in Johannesburg, and in pursuit of this objective Dr Ben-Zion Almuni, an enthusiastic journalist from Vilna, came out to South Africa. Although Almuni was desperately eager to found a South African Yiddish daily, and managed to raise a considerable sum of money and a large number of subscriber-shareholders in the two years he spent here, the local Jewish community – in rapid pursuit of English acculturation – was generally indifferent to the idea. Moreover, Johannesburg's Chief Rabbi, Dr JL Landau, whose influence on South African Jewish life was immense, was himself a powerfully committed Zionist and a vigorous opponent of the kind of militant Yiddishism such a newspaper might promote. While the Zionists were always to be victorious in the struggle for Jewish cultural identity in South Africa, the Yiddishists themselves, solipsistically hard-headed, were divided by rivalries and professional jealousies. Almuni's project – never in fact to be realized in South Africa – compromised with the establishment in 1932 of a new Yiddish weekly, *Der Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung*, which took over and incorporated *Der Afrikaner*.

The regular eight pages of this paper were uneconomically produced by handsetting from loose type, and were printed on dilapidated machines, but the hard labour of production was at all times one of love on the part of those devotees who put it together. Chief among these was Shmaryahu Levin, who did

virtually everything. When Almuni returned overseas, control of the paper passed into the hands of Boris Gershman, who had originally come to work for Almuni as an advertising canvasser. Excellent as he was at raising money, Gershman was himself not a writer, and the actual journalistic work was done by local writers whose chief contribution was to quarrel with one another and with Levin. It was at this stage in the fortunes of the paper that Gershman persuaded Levi Shalit to become one of its Chief contributors. The history of what happened thereafter is the subject of this interview.

Levi Shalit, who was born in Kuybyshev in Russia, received a traditional Jewish education when his family returned to Lithuania after the end of World War I. He studied at the great *yeshivot* of Telz and Slobodka, for the work and achievements of which he still feels the profoundest respect. In early manhood, Shalit turned to journalism, at which he showed great aptitude and soon made a considerable name for himself. From early youth, also, he was a committed Zionist, and became a prominent member of the Zionist Council in Lithuania after the Russian occupation in 1940. When the Nazis invaded Lithuania in 1941, Shalit was interned in Shavel, one of the two ghettos the Nazis established in Lithuania; in 1944, Shalit and his contemporary partisan fighters were rounded up and sent to Dachau. He survived by a miracle and was liberated after nine months by the Allied Army in the spring of 1945. His subsequent connection with South Africa and its Yiddish newspaper forms the chief matter of the conversation which follows [*Joseph Sherman – Editor*].

**Levi Shalit talks to Joseph Sherman about his
Life and Work with the Yiddish Press in South
Africa**

*Please describe the history of the newspaper as
you remember it.*

My association with the *Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung* dates back to 1946, some years before my arrival in South Africa. Boris Gershman, then the owner of the newspaper, visited the survivors of the Holocaust in Germany in 1946 and asked me to write articles for his paper.

You were living in Munich at the time?

Three months after the liberation, on 1 May 1945, of the concentration camp Dachau, I established, in Munich, *Undzer Veg* (Our Way), the weekly newspaper of the liberated Jews in Germany. It appeared in eighty thousand copies. Boris Gershman

actually suggested reprinting those of my articles which had been published in *Undzer Veg* in the *Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung*.

So that was your first connection with South Africa?

The first, but not the only one and not the decisive one. In 1947, a delegation of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, comprising Max Greenstein, Max Spitz and Mr Osrin, visited the Jews in Germany who had been liberated from concentration camps, on behalf of the SA Jewish War Appeal campaign, conducted under the auspices of the Board. Its purpose was to help Jewish war victims. The American Joint Distribution Committee, active among the survivors, gave a reception for the South African delegation. The director of the 'Joint' invited me to come and say a few words 'as a *Litvishe Yidn* ...' I seemed to find particular favour with Max Greenstein, and the delegation invited me to come to South Africa to open the War Appeal campaign, which was to start in three to four months' time. Max Greenstein spoke then with Dr Leo Schwartz, in Paris, the General Director of the 'Joint' in Europe, and requested his help in facilitating my going to South Africa for that special purpose.

Did you agree to the proposition?

I was not then particularly interested in the South African delegation's suggestion. I was preoccupied with events in *Eretz Yisrael* and I went there a month or so later. While I was in Israel, I received a telegram from the headquarters of the 'Joint' in Europe, informing me that the War Appeal campaign in South Africa was to open in 1948, and asking me to go there. There was still a war going on in Israel and all my thoughts were occupied by it. It was an agonising time. Nevertheless, friends were urging me to accept the invitation and go to South Africa for a few weeks. After some deliberation, I agreed and returned to Germany to obtain the necessary visa.

But you didn't really come to South Africa then, did you?

No, I did not. This was shortly after the time that Malan and the National Party had gained power in South Africa. The South African Mission in Frankfurt acceded to the Joint's request for a visa for me thinking, evidently, that like other 'Joint' workers, I was an American citizen. When it transpired, however, that I was a Displaced Person, and my 'passport' consisted of a piece of paper issued by the American Military Command in Germany, the SA Mission refused the visa they had formerly promised. The 'Joint' was prepared to give a guarantee that I would not remain in South Africa longer than the duration of the campaign, but to no avail. The mission in Frankfurt was adamant. No visa for a Displaced Person, since there was no place to deport him to should he choose to remain in their sunny land ... And I was supposed to be leaving for Johannesburg the very next day, on a KLM flight – the only one that was operating, at the time, on the Europe-South

Africa route.

So that put paid to your visit planned by the South African delegation?

I'm afraid so. Not having been eligible for a visa, I couldn't have boarded the plane.

I flew back to Israel on the next flight out.

So when did you finally come?

Well, there's another story attached to that. One day, in 1951, while on my way from Nahalal to a nearby *kibbutz*, I was very nearly killed by a car speeding towards me and then suddenly stopping beside me. The driver got out, greeted me warmly and asked me, without any further ado, whether I would still be interested in coming to South Africa for a Board campaign. It was Max Spitz, though I didn't recognise him at first. This was very difficult time in Israel, I was tired and weary, and I said yes ... In no time at all, Max Spitz attended to all necessary formalities and I was on my way to Johannesburg to launch the campaign, not of the War Appeal any longer, but that of the United Communal Fund.

Did that pave your way to the newspaper?

I addressed Jewish communities throughout the country. The campaign achieved great success and the Board asked me to stay longer than was first planned, and certainly much longer than I intended to stay. All the while, I contributed articles to the *Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung*. There was no one then to write the leading articles, and I was asked to do that, too. I remember one particular time when Boris Gershman woke me up at dawn saying that he needed my presence in the printing works at once. The newspaper was ready, but something of importance had just occurred in Israel and a new leading article was imperative. Would I please come immediately? The car was already on its way to fetch me ... So, my association with the paper was really a continuous one, since that day in Germany when Boris Gershman approached me. The newspaper was, during my early days in Johannesburg, functioning well on the administrative side, but the entire editorial staff consisted of one person only, Shmaryahu Levin. He had worked for the newspaper for a very long time and was a fine, upstanding man.

Who were some of the journalists and writers that contributed to the newspaper at the time?

Overseas journalists like Leneman in Paris, Harendorf in London, Schneiderman in New York, Itzhaki in Tel-Aviv. Local contributors included YS Yudelowitz, Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, Rabbi Romm, Michael Ben Moshe and, of course, Shmaryahu Levin. He was in love with his job and with newspapers in general. He originated from Vilna and was steeped in its Jewish atmosphere. He was fond of saying that the smell of printing ink was his equivalent of oxygen. Towards the end of 1953, tragedy struck. Boris Gershman passed away. I wrote the obituary at the request of the family. Mrs Gershman, whom I knew very well, asked me to go

on writing the leading articles on a permanent basis.

Who owned the newspaper, after Gershman passed away?

The Gershman family, as part of their printing business. After a short while – five or six months – Mrs Gershman suggested that Levin and I should buy the newspaper.

And you bought it?

A family matter made it necessary for me to remain in South Africa for some while, I accepted Mrs Gershman's offer and bought the paper, in partnership with Shmaryahu Levin. Slowly, we began building up our own printing press, brought linotype setters from Israel to do the Yiddish setting when no local operators could be found. And so we became independent. The newspaper grew in esteem and status.

Who were, by then, the contributors?

We endeavoured to have more locally flavoured contributions, but we did not neglect overseas writers either. The poets H Leivick, Jacob Glatshetyn and Chaim Grade, the writers Isaac Bashevis Singer and Mordkhe Shtrigler, to mention but a few, were regular contributors. Many prominent Hebrew writers and poets appeared on our pages in translation. The *Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung* became not just a journalistic publication, but a literary one as well. In all, these were twenty years of work which gave real and true writer's pleasure and satisfaction.

Does that mean that there was a large enough readership to support the newspaper?

Of course. Still, no newspaper can survive on readership alone. We set up an efficient advertising department which supplied what the subscriptions were unable to. But the lively readership and the positive response we were receiving from our publication gave us the necessary impetus to work.

Could you say how many readers there were at its best?

At its best, four to five thousand copies were printed.

A week?

Sure. It was a weekly publication, same as the other Jewish publications in English.

This is from about 1954 to about 1970/75?

That's right.

And in that time you built up your own printing press?

We had a printing works and editorial and administrative offices. It became an address known and visited by many. The place was 100 Market Street, Johannesburg. We found the right people to work for us, we found the adverts, we distributed the newspaper through the CAN and directly to our subscribers.

How many people did you employ at the time?

I think between fifteen and twenty. Two years after purchasing the newspaper, we bought a property where we housed the printing works and the offices of the newspaper.

So the printing that was done on the premises was that of the newspaper only? You didn't take in any outside work?

Not much. We brought out four big issues a year: for *Rosheshone*, *Peysekh*, Israel's Day of Independence and *Chanukah*. Together, between 800 and 1000 pages a year.

In Yiddish only?

At first in Yiddish only. Later on, half of each Festival Issue was published in English. The weekly paper, however, remained exclusively in Yiddish.

I understand that the newspaper was very Zionist minded, pro-Israel, while the majority of the readers were perhaps otherwise inclined. Is that true?

Not exactly. Most of the readers were actually Zionist sympathizers. The tragedy was that the organised Yiddishists were so hardened in their old pre-war anti-Zionistic attitude. It amounted to a sort of farce, with overtones of deep irony. Imagine Jews who came from Europe, trying to bring to life a far leftist 'revolution' in South Africa! This inevitably resulted in a rift between the newspaper's ideology as propagated by us and that of the organised Yiddishists. In my capacity as the newspaper's editor, I did try not to antagonise them, but to no avail. I was, after all, outspokenly and actively an avowed Zionist and have been all my life. The *Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung* was supporting both the Zionist cause and the local Zionist Federation. That had already begun in Gershman's time.

Were you connected with Israel throughout your editorship of the Afrikaner Yidishe Tsaytung?

I used to visit Israel frequently once we established ourselves, and would remain there for extended periods of time. I always made sure that the articles I wrote while I was in Israel would reach the newspaper in Johannesburg in good time for its weekly publication. I would go to the airport and find someone willing to take it along and forward it, immediately upon arrival, to our offices. If the piece was urgently needed, Shmaryahu Levin would come to the airport himself to collect it at once. As I mentioned before, these were twenty wonderful years for me, filled with work which gave me deep personal satisfaction. And then, like everything in life, the newspaper began its decline. Readers, mostly readers. With the decline in readership came also the decline of love and devotion and so the necessary impetus.

So when did you finally decide to shut down the newspaper?

In 1985.

Could you tell me something about your decision which, I'm sure, was not easy one?

Three things happened almost simultaneously. The readership declined, due to natural causes; Shmaryahu Levin fell ill; and the economic situation in the country changed for the worse. Advertising was not so easily obtainable any more. Still, it was the drop in readership subscriptions which was the decisive factor. It was not worth while any more going on publishing a newspaper for five to six hundred subscribers, however loyal these might be.

In the good times of plentiful readers, would you say, in comparison with the prevalence of Yiddish in the world, that South Africa had a good tradition of the language?

Unfortunately not.

Why so?

Probably due to the fact that the first Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe had no profound Yiddish cultural background.

How far, do you think, it is true to say that Yiddish in South Africa was always a struggling language, that people were not really keen on Yiddish?

I wouldn't say it struggled when I first came to South Africa. The language of the street was, naturally, English and the new immigrants wanted to learn it. They particularly wanted their children to learn it, even though it caused a great deal of estrangement within families. Even the committed Yiddishists thought that it was enough for Yiddish to satisfy only themselves. Their children they brought up in English.

Do you think it a pity?

I'm certain it is. I think the children would have been culturally richer, being brought up in both cultures instead of just one.

And today, would you say that the young South African Jewish person has a grasp of the two cultures?

Not really. Not as we understand it.

What about Yiddish in Israel?

Yiddish in Israel is not struggling any more as it did once. Hebrew has taken over in most spheres of Israeli life.

Was this a conscious effort on the part of the Zionists?

It was so perhaps, years and years ago. It was a normal enough reaction and development. After all, it is such a small country and the will for a complete renewal was so great. As in the old way, the classical way, instead of answering you directly, I'll tell you a story. I was walking with the Yiddish poet, H Leivick, in the streets of Tel-Aviv in 1952, and he was expounding to me the necessity of Yiddish. I was younger and cheekier then, and I told him to look

at all the various people passing in the street, coming from all corners of the globe, among them many places where Yiddish was unknown. 'Do you want to begin now to teach them Yiddish?' I asked him. And Leivick answered: 'What did they bring with them, those who came from Pakistan, from Aden and other like places? How much culture, Jewish culture, have they brought with them? So why not Yiddish? We did have, and we brought with us, a language specifically ours and a culture of a thousand years of Jewish history.' It was perhaps a good answer but on a level which did little for the people we saw passing us in the street. It neither reached them nor did it translate into an incentive for them. They had to learn Hebrew to get by in daily life, to earn a living.

So do you see any future for Yiddish?

Yes, but on a different, very high level. Yiddish is nowadays taught in many universities. I regularly receive letters from Jewish intellectuals written in a beautiful literary Yiddish. Not kitchen Yiddish but *Shabes* Yiddish, and so it shall remain. A few hundred years ago, a Jew was not allowed to study at Oxford, but today, Oxford – of all places – has a big centre for the study of Yiddish.

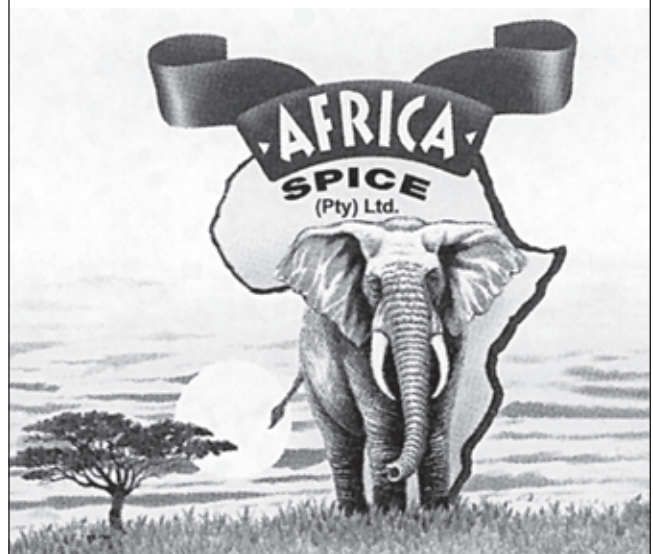
So you think positively about the future of Yiddish?

As a language of the Jews in the street, no. But then, there is no Jewish street, as we knew it, any more.

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THE IRONY OF FAITH: SHOLOM ALEICHEM'S 'DREYFUS IN KASRILEVKE'

*

Joseph Sherman

(First published in *Jewish Affairs*, Summer 1994)

Truth shall spring out of the earth: and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

Psalm 85:11

On such assurances of God's justice, a *leitmotif* of the Psalms, was the faith of Eastern European Jewry built. At the turn of this century, the devout of the *shtetl* maintained this conviction in the teeth of divisive forces that eroded both their spiritual and their physical security.

Among the most dramatic challenges to this kind of faith was the persecution of Alfred Dreyfus between 1894 and 1906. The Dreyfus Affair not only undermined the basis of conventional piety, however, it severely damaged that secular belief in the benefits of Emancipation to which the Jews of Europe had clung since the French Revolution. It destroyed the hope fostered by the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, that under the protection of a liberal secular state, Jews could live out their lives in security, practice their religion in tolerance, and preserve their culture unmolested. At the very moment that Yiddish was being wrought into a literary language, its authors confronted, during the Dreyfus Affair, shocking proof that whatever they produced would never become part of the literature of a Europe that persisted in hating its Jews. No Yiddish writer was more earnestly engaged in creating that literature than Sholom Aleichem. None was more alive to the devastating consequences of the Dreyfus case for Jewish survival, or better equipped to dramatise with startling prescience its central ambiguity.

The narrative method Sholom Aleichem chose was, as always, a uniquely ambivalent humour which exposes terror in the act of laughing at it. He himself defined the origin and purpose of a technique which made him the most widely loved and perhaps least properly understood of early modern Yiddish writers:

I tell you it is an ugly and mean world and only to spite it one mustn't weep! If you want to know, that is the real source, the true cause of my constant good spirits, of my, as it is called, 'humour'. Not to cry out of spite! Only to laugh out of spite, *only to laugh!*¹

To assess the catastrophic ramifications of Dreyfus on that third of world Jewry who lived in Eastern Europe, doggedly attempting to preserve their fathers' faith against multi-dimensional assault, Sholom Aleichem sets his tale in his metonymic *shtetl* of Kasrilevke. Kasrilevke cannot be found on any map of the Pale of Settlement, yet each *shtetl* which can so be found is Kasrilevke, the hamlet of

pious paupers. No living Jew ever emigrated from Kasrilevke, yet every Eastern European Jew immigrant is a Kasrilevker. This famous literary trope offers its creator a perfect crucible in which to test the consequences of the Dreyfus explosion on the elements within it. Here, as the tale's narrator informs us from the outset, the Jewish world is cut off from direct contact with the contemporary world and the cataclysmic events which shape it. Whether they want it or not, however, that world will engulf them.

The Kasrilevkites have no direct access to information about political and economic pressures which spark the Anglo-Boer War, which stimulate China's trade with the West, which convulse Paris with intrigue (pp.61-62).² Yet all these events are forced upon their consciousness through the maskilic innovation of Jewish newspapers. The *shtetl*'s most 'enlightened' inhabitant, Zaydl Reb Shayes, subscribes to one of the most influential of these, the moderate Hebrew-language *Ha-tsfirah* (The Dawn), founded and edited in the last decade of the 19th Century by Nahum Solokow, later to become a world leader of the Zionist movement. From Zaydl's readings of this newspaper the Kasrilevkites receive international news – but not, the narrator emphasizes, their understanding of it. Neither Zaydl nor his newspaper is granted final authority; on the contrary, they merely supply raw material which the Kasrilevkites interpret for themselves:

Zaydl reb shayes iz der eyntsiker in shtot, vos shraybt-oys dem 'tsfire'. un ale nayesn, vos tuen zikh op oyf der velt, verd men gevar fun im, dos heyst, nit fun im, nor durkh im. er leyent zey, un zey fartaytshn; er dertseylt, un zey lernen dem pshat: er zogt vos se shteyt, un zey dringn oft farkert, vorem **zey farshteyn beser**. (p62)

Zaydl Reb Shayes is the only person in town who subscribes to *Ha-tsfirah*. And from him the people are made aware of all the events which take place in the world, that is to say, not from him, but through him. He reads to them, and they explain; he tells them, and they explicate the meaning: he says what is printed there, and they often deduce incorrectly, *because they know better*.

Through the stubborn insistence of the Kasrilevke *shtotslayt*, we are confronted with the ambivalent

demands of two kinds of truth: the truth of newspaper reportage, as opposed to the truth that Kasrilevke upholds. Cunningly tempted by the narrative voice to laugh at the apparently invincible ignorance of unworldly *kleynshtetldike yidn* in the face of the testimony of press journalism, we will soon be confronted with the essential relativity of truth. We shall have to contrast the truth of men and the transient world with the truth of God and the everlasting world. The difference – as Sholom Aleichem well knows – will not sustain an unequivocal answer in the aftermath of Dreyfus's second trial and conviction, because that verdict blows to pieces the sustaining devotion of centuries, and leaves nothing in its place.

Initially, Dreyfus's difficulties bolster Kasrilevke's contempt for assimilation and the corrupting effects of emancipation. When the *shtetl* first hears of his arrest and conviction *vos er hot aroysgegebn noytike papirn fun der melukhe*, 'because he had distributed essential government documents', they blend reprobation with dour pleasure at what seems to them his well-merited come-uppance:

- *vos tut nit a yid tsulib parnose? ...*
- *a mitsve! Loz a yidele nit krikhn oybn-on un zikh nit mishn tsvishn kisrim!* (p62)
- What a Jew won't do for a living!
- Serve him right! A little Jew shouldn't try to creep up to the highest places and mix with royalty!

This exchanged painfully exposes the extent to which Eastern European Jews have passively accepted the definition imposed upon them by the antisemitic prejudices of others. They have wholly internalised the denigration of centuries which withholds from a Jew any right to identify or rank in the Gentile social formation of which he is an unwanted part. The automatic conviction of these two colloquists is that Jews are forever destined to be deprived of state, citizenship or rights.

Having taken over as their own self-evaluation the evaluation made of them by Jew-haters, the Kasrilevkites console themselves by disparaging the dignity of equality in the secular world. They voice this self-protective contempt in the unconscious Yiddish malapropism *frantsehoyszndike*, by which they refer to the French for whom the correct Yiddish word is *frantsoyzn*. By punning on the word *frat*, 'dandy', and *hoysz*, 'trousers', Sholom Aleichem amusingly makes his *kleyne mentshelekh* dismiss the French with a term which literally means 'fancy pants'. This word-play consequently ends up making a contemptuous appraisal of that people's claim to moral, cultural and social superiority, reducing them instead to mendacious poseurs. At the beginning of his career, Dreyfus seemed to have validated Napoleon's promise that all Frenchmen, of whatever religious conviction, could be promoted on merit to the highest ranks of French service and society. Now

his scapegoating shows the whole world that this promise was a lie.

This point is made with devastating wit through the seemingly myopic eyes and bumbling tongues of Sholom Aleichem's Kasrilevkites. But in making this error, are they really so short-sighted or speech-impaired? Do they not instinctively perceive that Dreyfus – and by extension all Western European Jews – are living in self-delusion? In Paris, the glittering capital of Western Europe, Captain Dreyfus is a victim of the identical Jew-hatred to which *zhidi parkhatie* are daily exposed in a provincial backwater of Tsarist Russia. Enlightened France treats its Jews in the same way as despotic Russia, an equation deftly pointed by one Kasrilevker who deplores the nature of Dreyfus's punishment in Russian phrase *vetchnoe poselenie*, 'perpetual banishment' (p63). How different, then, are the lives of Jews in the West? Unlike Dreyfus, though, Kasrilevke has accepted this treatment as part of the unchangeable order of things. Their postmaster Yeremei, an archetypal Russian Jew-hater, curses them in the foulest language as they gather in his post office to await the latest issue of Zaydl's newspaper; *zey hobn im ober gehert*, the narrative voice tells us, *vi haman der groger*, 'they heard him as much as Haman hears the Purim rattle' (p64). A double irony is manipulated here. On the most obvious level, the Jews through long exposure have grown impervious to abuse. On another level, however, Haman is equally impervious to the annual execrations of Jews, not because he is dead but because he continues to exist. The childish noises by which Jews attempt annually to blot out his name are exercises in futility. Haman exists perpetually, reincarnated as much in the crude figure of Janitor Yeremei as in the sophisticated person of General Boisdeffre (p64).

Now suddenly a crack appears to have opened in the wall of Jew-hatred. Dreyfus, so far from deserving to be put down from a station to which he should never have aspired, is revealed as the innocent victim of a malign conspiracy; his case is taken up by well-disposed Gentiles in search of justice; his sentence is to be reconsidered. This is the turning-point for Kasrilevke, offering them invincible proof that G-d's justice still operates in the world. Suddenly Dreyfus becomes one of them, or equally to the point, they themselves stand Dreyfus's place. He becomes the embodiment of all victimized Jews. This is why, in the tale's opening sentence, the narrative voice asserts that *ikh veys nit, oyb di mayse fun dreyfus hot nokh ergets ongemakht aza rash vi in kasrilevke*, 'I don't know whether anywhere else the Dreyfus Affair made as great a tumult as it did in Kasrilevke' (p61). In Paris, the event takes on the aspect of a carnival, in which opposing sides, as if participating in some kind of game, throw their hats into the air and shout for the team they are supporting (p61). In Kasrilevke it becomes a matter of life and death because *yidn hot men dervayl geshmirt, gemakht mit der blote, vi gevoynelekh*, 'Jews were meanwhile reviled, besmeared with mud, as usual' (p61). Dreyfus's retrial offers at last the potential

confrontation of truth with lies, of justice with injustice. Here is the opportunity for God to honor the promise of the Jewish faith. The fervor with which the Kasrilevkites long for Dreyfus' return from imprisonment on Devil's Island is expressed in liturgical language; it becomes a prayer for the salvation of the whole Jewish people:

reboyne-sheloylem! – hobn zey mitpalel geven bay zikh in hartsn – zolst im khotsh brengn besholem aheyim, vu der mishpet badarf zany! Zolst khotsh efenen di oygn fun di rikhter un klor makhn zeyere moykhes, zey zoln gefinen dem shuldikn, un di gantse velt zol aroyszen undzer gerekhikkayt, ameyn sele! (p65)

Master of the Universe! – they prayed in their hearts – May you at least bring him in peace back home, there where the judgment needs to be given. May you at least open the eyes of the judges and clear their minds to they may discover the guilty one, and the whole world may behold our vindication, Amen Selah!

The narrative style subtly manipulates language to distinguish Jews from Gentiles, believers from unbelievers, victims from persecutors. The Kasrilevkites' ignorance of any other language but Yiddish (and some Hebrew) transmutes their educational shortcoming into a moral advantage. Their prayers for Dreyfus and for themselves are articulated in *loshn koydesh*, the morally unequivocal Holy Tongue. By contrast, Yeremei reviles them in jargon, jumbling together bits of Ukrainian, Russian and German in a torrent of gibberish which bespeaks a disordered hatred as uncontrollable as it is pathological. Vindictively driving them from his post office, he shouts:

mut ne zhidovska skola, zhidi parkhatie, mut ne kahal sakhermakheri! (p64)

This isn't a Jew-boy school, mangy Yids this isn't a gathering-place for huckstering!³

To the ears of Kasrilevke, the French language reduces the antisemites who persecute Dreyfus to a single faceless menace sharing one common name. What, the linguistically uncomprehending Jews of Kasrilevke imply, is the difference between one French Jew-hater and another?

es iz tsugekumen ale mol a frisher parshoyn: frier 'esterhazy', nokh dem 'pikert', nokh dem general 'mersi', 'peli', 'gonzi', un derbay iz gezogt gevorn a hamtsoe, az bay di 'frantsehoyzndike' vi bald a nomen fun a general, azoy muz zikh oyslozn mit a 'yud'. (p64)

Every time some personage appeared on the scene: first 'Esterhazy', then 'Pikert' [Picquart], then General 'Mersi' [Mercier], 'Peli' [Pellieux], 'Gonzi' [Gonse], and a novel idea was derived

from this, that among the fancy-pants French, as soon as there's a general, his name must end in an 'i'.

By contrast, through their own language, the people of Kasrilevke salt their longing for the return of Dreyfus with Hebrew pietisms, visualizing Dreyfus not merely as a disembodied symbol of oppressed Jewry, but also with touching fellow-feeling as a man, a husband, and a father. When they hear Dreyfus has arrived safely back in France they thank *hashem yisborakh*, 'the holy One Blessed be He'; they long to see *beshas mayse*, the God-given holy moment of Dreyfus's reunion with his wife and children; *bes mayse*, in the same holy moment, women bury their faces in their aprons to hide the fact that they are weeping (p66). When the second trial begins, they pray that *got zol shoymer umatsil zany*, 'God should guard and protect' him who has been falsely accused. They have not the slightest doubt that the truth of the Scriptures, which is the justice of God, will assert itself.

They idolize Zola and Labori as agents of this absolute. For Zola *volt zikh yeder eyntsiker mafkir geven*, 'every single person would have sacrificed himself' (p64). Labori and his eloquence body forth *oylem-umloye*, literally 'the world and its fullness':

Khotsh horkhn hot im in kasrilevke keyner nisht gehorkht, nor m'hot farshtanen mint seykh! az er badarf konen reyd. (p65)

Although no one in Kasrilevke had ever heard him, nevertheless they understood as a simple matter of logic *that he was absolutely capable of speaking*.

Consequently the news that Labori – one of the advocates defending Dreyfus at Rennes – has been shot⁴ is greeted with exclamations which consciously recall the worst of Biblical afflictions. '*Khoyshekh! Khoyshekh!*' they cry, evoking the darkness which overcame Egypt in the time of its plagues; the crime *iz erger vi in sdom*, 'worse than in Sodom' (p66). The murderous attempt is seen as a direct attack upon themselves personally; for them it is a monstrous defiance of God's order:

der doziker shos hot zey dem kop arop-genumen. di dozike koyl hto zey getrofn glaykh in hartzn arayn. Glaykh vi er hot geshosn oyf kasrilevke. (p66)

This same shot had blown off their heads. This same shot had penetrated directly into their own hearts, exactly as if he [the assassin] had taken aim at Kasrilevke.

They immediately pray for a miracle, and before their eyes and to their complete understanding their prayer is answered: *got borukh-hu hot a nes geton*, the Holy One, Blessed be He, performed a miracle' (p.66) and Labori lives.

The narrative structure deliberately balances in ironic suspension unquestioning faith in God's judgment with the vagaries of human determinations. As Kasrilevke waits for the second verdict, they have no doubt that truth will shine forth. At the same time, however, they are aware that like everything else in the world this is conditional – *im yirtse hashem*, if God wills it'. Therefore the night before the verdict is due they cannot sleep a wink; in anguished suspense they converge on the post office at first light, impatiently willing it to open and Zaydl to appear with the newspaper which, for them, must trumpet forth the affirmation of God. Even as they wait, they unconsciously seek assurance in the signifiers of their faith: [*zey hobn*] *gedreyt dip peye un gezungen shtilerheyt fun hallel*, 'they twisted their earlocks and quietly sang snatches of the *Hallel*.' The touching of the earlocks, one of the outward signs of their covenant with God, is linked to their singing that part of the liturgy used on days of special thanksgiving to God for His mercies to humankind.⁵

The possibility that all may not turn out in accordance with the expectations of conventional belief has been prepared for earlier. In discussing the chances of a different verdict being handed down at the second trial,

der hot gezogt, az der mishpet vet nokh a mol gemishpet vern, un der hot gedungen az neyn: eyn akher mayse bezdn klum—opgemishpet, is farfaln (p63)

One said that the judgement would be revised, and another insisted that it would not: *after a verdict has been given, there is no appeal*; once judged, all is lost ...

The existence of two kinds of judgment is pointed in the application of the Talmudic principle *eyn akher bezdn klum* to the workings of a secular court. In the administration of justice in rabbinical courts, to which the phrase refers, the litigants agree beforehand to accept without further question the verdict of the *dayonim* whose probity is taken to be beyond question. Since in handing down a *din toyre*, rabbinical judges theoretically speak in God's name through His Revealed Word, there can be no appeal against their judgments. Secular courts do not inspire the same confidence, as Dreyfus's trials painfully demonstrate. The judgment twice handed down has nothing to do with absolute morality and everything to do with the protection of vested interests by biased judges. A secular court is not a *bezdn*. Hence the irony operates on mutually disturbing levels. Since a secular court, unlike a rabbinical court, recognizes the possibility of error, it offers the right of appeal to amend injustice. Because the innocence of Dreyfus has been protested throughout all Europe, it is confidently expected that the secular court will now recognise its mistake. But, in a bitter reversal, the second speaker of the above exchange is proved correct. The second trial does indeed uphold the letter of the Talmudic principle, but in a manner

directly contrary to its spirit. Hence Kasrilevke's appalled and uncomprehending outrage.

This response exposes the full irony of faith. Having placed an unquestioning trust in Divine justice, Kasrilevke cites the recurrent theme of the Psalms in confirmation: *himl un erd hobn geshvorn, az der emes muz aroyf, viboyml oyfn vaser*, 'heaven and earth have sworn that the truth must rise to the top as oil on water' (p68). From this conviction nothing can shake them – as always, 'they know better'. So their final confrontation cannot be with the perversions of the impious Gentile world, but with Zyd as the disseminator of secular falsehood. The pious of Kasrilevke have not the slightest trust in the solemn assurances of Zaydl and his maskilic newspaper (p67). Zaydl's enraged bafflement vividly dramatises the irreconcilable demands of the truth of faith and the truth of reality:

–beheymes!–shrayt nebekh zaydl mit ale koykhes un shupt zey dos blat glaykh in ponim arayn. –nat, zet vos se shteyt in blat! – blat-shmat!–shrayt kasrilevke – un az du vest zikh shteln ot do mit eyn fus oyfn himl! un mit der anderer oyf der erd – veln mir dir gloybn? s'iz a zakh, vos es kin nit zayn! Es kon nit zayn! ... a simen – ver iz geven gerekht? ... (p68)

–Cattle!–poor Zaydl shouted with all his strength, and shoved the newspaper into their faces. –Here, see what it says in the paper! – Paper-shmaper! – Kasrilevke yelled. – Even if you stood here with one foot in heaven and the other on the earth–would we believe you? This is something which cannot be! It cannot be! ... An omen – who was right?

The tale's crowning irony is summed up in its last, ambiguous line. The word *simen*, meaning as it does a sign or an omen, is linked to the tale's central demand – who was right, the secular newspaper with its maskilic bias, or the truth of God Most High who has sworn to reward the righteous and punish the wicked? This question, by juxtaposing the demands of faith with the coercions of secularity, sharply interrogates the promises of the Emancipation at the same time as it challenges the basis of received religion.

The Dreyfus Affair was the first event of modern history to turn the question of continued Jewish survival into a conundrum that demanded immediate solution even as it made clear that such a solution could never be found. The 'Affair' dispelled all possibility of reconciling religious preachment with secular practice. It made it clear that a religious solution could not be found in secularism any more than a secular solution could be found in religion. The possibility of a Jew living in dignity in the European diaspora was conclusively proved to be an illusion. Yet for Jews to maintain an unquestioning belief in God's beneficent providence was show to be equally hopeless. Such faith had not protected them in their past, and it has again failed to protect

them in their present. This tale starkly poses the insoluble 20th Century Jewish dilemma. How are Jews to live, if at all? Sholom Aleichem has no solution to offer. But Kasrilevke's agonized reception of the Dreyfus Trial becomes, as he puts it with startling foresight, a *simen*, a prognostication of still greater perplexity to come.

A further intriguing question is raised by the story's date of composition. Sholom Aleichem's tale was written in 1902, four years into Dreyfus's quest for the *Révision*, in the year of Zola's death, by which time most of the other parties involved had been thoroughly discredited. Yet Dreyfus remained unexonerated, and the Jews of Eastern Europe were only months away from the catastrophic pogrom of Kishinev, a barbarity which finally convinced the Jewish world that only they themselves could provide a solution to the problem of their continued survival. By 1902 Herzl, two years from death himself, was desperately seeking a territorial solution to this 'Jewish Question', once posed by hostile Gentiles about the people they most hated, but now of frenzied immediacy to Jews themselves. For ultra-orthodox believers, however, such a solution was and remains a blasphemous desecration of God's name. Kasrilevke and its inhabitants have long been reduced to unidentifiable ashes scattered irrecoverable all over Poland. Yet even after Auschwitz, its pious descendants continue to believe that faith alone will sustain the Jewish people, that the verdict given against Dreyfus – and by genocidal Nazi extension against the whole of Jewry – cannot be true. As human apprehension perceives it, God – if He exists and, existing, cares – not only allowed the sufferings of Dreyfus, but the even more extensive savagery of Auschwitz of which Dreyfus was the precursor. It is this recognition that lends such potency to the *simen* which Sholom Aleichem so early identified in his reading of *l'Affaire*.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Charles Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York, 1971), p96.
- 2 All references to and quotations from *Dreyfus in Kasrilevke* are to the Yiddish text published in *Kleyne mentshelekh mit kleyne hazhgokhes*, Vol. 6 of *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleikhem* (Vilna-Warsaw, 1925), pp.61-68. All translations in this essay are mine. A competent English translation of the whole story, made by Hilde Abel, is published in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (eds), *a Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York, 1973), pp187-92.
- 3 The jargon word *sakhermakheri* is a corruption of the German word *Schacherei*, the term used by Marx to attack the 'economic degeneracy' of world Jewry. The word first appears in Marx's review-essay *Zur Judenfrage* (1843), where he gives the following notorious definition: 'What is the worldly cult of the Jews? *Huckstering [Schacherei]*. What is his worldly god? *Money*'. See T.B. Bottomore (trans.), *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London, 1963), pp.32-40.
- 4 Fernand Labori (1860-1917) was the distinguished French advocate who represented Zola in the libel action brought

against him in February 1898. As a result of his impressive defence, Labori was invited to assist Edgar Demange (1841-1925), Dreyfus's original advocate, at the retrial at Rennes in August 1898. Demange and Labori could not agree on the correct strategy to be used at Dreyfus's second trial; to complicate matters further, Labori was shot in the back by an unidentified young man on 14 August 1898. the wound was not severe, and Labori was back in court a week later, on 22 August 1898. See Guy Chapman, *The Dreyfus Trials* (London, 1972), pp.131, 230 236-37.

- 5 *Hallel* is a prayer of praise composed of sections of Psalms 113-118. It is sung on most Jewish festivals of jubilation, either in full or in an abridged version.

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TOWARDS A 'PROPER' LIBRARY, OR SIX THOUSAND BOOKS IN SEARCH OF A HOME

*

Joseph Sherman

Editor's Note: This essay, suitably abridged, by the late Dr. Joseph Sherman first appeared in *A World Too Wide: Essays on Libraries and Other Themes in Honour of Reuben Musiker* (edited by Dr. Sherman, University of the Witwatersrand Library, 1993).

Aside from the importance of the subject matter, the essay well conveys the flamboyant humor, passion, erudition and sometimes outspoken acerbity that made Sherman so memorable and forceful a personality, especially when he was arguing on behalf of his beloved, and sadly all too often neglected, Yiddish language and literature.

Although most of my life has been spent among books, candour and astonishment alike compel me to confess that from earliest childhood I always loathed librarians. Fascination with the contents of libraries was for me akin to the stupefaction attributed to the discoverers of wondrous treasures described in countless fairy tales, and my approach to them equally fraught with menace. Like so many rubies and pearls, the books I coveted were imprisoned in gorgeous caves, the entrances to which were guarded by venomous monsters disguised as uncomely, unpleasant and unblinking old women (so they seemed), who had been created solely to ensure that no child ever took pleasure in a room full of books, or was ever permitted to borrow one without wrenching fear and worse foreboding.

This dread was first instilled in me by the ambience of the so-called 'Children's section of the Johannesburg Public Library, a building whose imperiously dismissive grandeur was reinforced by highly polished brass handles on enormous glass-paned doors of costly wood, and feet-repulsing mirror-like parquet floors. In this room, there was to be absolutely no talking, no laughter (perish the thought), and no joy. Every attempt to take out a book summarily called forth a ferocious cross-examination regarding one's previous borrowing record and one's future intentions, which always concluded with a savage reminder - several times repeated - of when the book was to be returned, and of what appalling punishment would befall if it were not. To a little boy growing up in Mayfair, who took no interest in sports of any kind, and whose chief pleasure in school holidays was to sit on the top deck of the tram and travel Townwards to the Library, this was a sorry introduction to the workings of the [self-styled] "Mind's Treasure-House".

Would things be different at high school? Consistently determined to waste no energy on balls and bats, I offered to help in the library. Guess what? Horribly, impossibly, but all too tangibly, there again was another incarnation of Grendel's dam, four-eyed and silent-soled, hissing and creeping. Given some catalogue cards to fill out, I found myself

within seconds being criticised for the way I formed my Ns and dotted my capital Is; patronized with a supercilious smirk; and sharply told that handwriting defects automatically disqualified me from making any useful contribution to the ordering of a proper library. All I was allowed to do was to shelve the returned books, as long as - Mother Grendel was odiously emphatic about this - I was certain I knew the alphabet accurately. It was then that I decided - despite all financial disadvantages - to start collecting my own books in hopes of escaping librarians forever. I eagerly awaited the day I could enter university and discover there the delights of a 'proper' library. There I was certain to be at home.

O vain is the trust of users! When I came as an undergraduate to Wits there was only one Library whose main Reading Room was a larger, quieter (were such things possible?) more forbidding version of the Children's Morgue at JPL. And here too, alas, I did not know how to behave. I whispered to friends, discussed books and periodicals, received regular rebukes, was finally criminalized into a 'delinquent borrower' and served time in exile. Still later, when I was a part-time post-graduate student, I was unremittently persecuted by a small-time Fafner who derived obsessive gratification from repeatedly telephoning me both at work and at home, at all hours of day and night, to demand the return of books which no one else needed and without which I could not continue my research.

Drawn always to great collections of books, beckoning invitingly into worlds yet unexplored, I was for years malevolently repulsed from them by a series of hateful custodians who appeared to uphold as a sacred and self-evident truth that a library was a place where millions of books, all neatly catalogued in handwritings displaying no eccentricities whatever, quietly gathered dust on the shelves where they were perfectly arranged in the most exact alphabetical order, and were never - but never - disturbed by the rough and all unready hand of a borrower. And then I met Reuben Musiker.

I went to that meeting twelve years ago with a great deal of trepidation. I needed to make what was

for me a momentous request, and hard experience had taught me that librarians automatically answered all requests in the negative. A friend of mine - a Russian emigré whose mother was a typesetter on one of Israel's few Yiddish daily newspapers - was at that time a social worker based at Benevolent House, the Yeoville head-quarters of the Johannesburg Jewish Women's Benevolent Association. Wandering through the building one day he had opened a locked door into a darkened room, and had there discovered dozens of shelves filled with Yiddish books in perfect condition, marked up and classified, to all appearances ready for borrowing, but utterly bereft of readers. The directors of the building's operations were vociferously demanding the removal of those books. They took up space needed for more important purposes; they were no longer read; in any case they were in the despised Yiddish tongue. Who needs Yiddish books nowadays? Throw them out. My friend appealed to me - would not the University, where I was then working, take them? After all, was not a university a repository of the accumulated learning of the ages?

A few enquiries revealed that the custodian of the Landau Library, the University's collection of Judaica, was not simply uninterested in Yiddish books - she was positively hostile. Being Israeli, she had no use for *lashon ha-Galut*. No, she definitely did not want them. Whatever for? We are living in the present now, and preparing for the future - and both present and future are Hebrew and Israel. Forget it. Pulp them. So I was left with no alternative but to

try to appeal to the Blatant Beast himself, 'a dreadful fiend, of gods and men ydrad'. Nevertheless, I wanted those books to be saved, and I wanted them to be in a 'proper' library, so I made an appointment to see Professor Musiker.

The moment of our meeting was one of those rare epiphanies that privileged individuals experience only once in a whole lifetime. All my bitter memories and deep resentments against the species *librarian*, if they did not vanish - how could they? - assumed a new dimension. Not all librarians were negative, self-opinionated, self-righteous and unpleasant. Here was a person gently spoken, attentive, and above all caring. Yes, of course the University Library would take these books - such a valuable addition, such a splendid nucleus to what could become a growing collection. What a valuable resource, what a treasure trove ...

We could have the books! Professor Musiker had said so! And the books could not come 'on permanent loan' as the Benevolent Women had at first unbenevolently demanded - the Library could accept them only on condition that their ownership was vested in the University. These volumes had originally belonged to Mendel Tabatznik, one of South Africa's most prolific Yiddish writers, most dedicated teachers and most active *folksmentshn*. On his death, he had left them to be used as a lending library, to enrich the lives of others as they had enriched his own. For several years they had indeed done so, until those dwindling numbers of readers themselves slowly passed on. Now orphaned and



Opening of the Mendel Tabatznik Yiddish Collection, Landau Library, 26 November 1984. From left, Joseph Sherman, Professor Reuben Musiker, David Tabatznik and the distinguished Yiddish poets David Wolpe and David Fram.

homeless, they were to be adopted and sheltered.

So arrangements were made at the University of the Witwatersrand to receive the collection, and a fitting official function was planned at which this impressive addition to the Library's holdings could be welcomed. The Jewish Women's Benevolent Association now generously agreed to do the catering, the Library found some money to provide drinks, invitations to a variety of distinguished patrons were sent out, and the function – held on Monday evening, 26 November 1984 in the Landau Library itself – became one of the great memories of my association with libraries.¹

As Reuben had anticipated, the Tabatznik collection, which was formally handed over by its founder's son David, began to bud. Once it became known that the University Library was prepared – even eager – to receive Yiddish works, we were flooded with offers from people all over the city eager to find homes for once cherished Yiddish books. With the willing acquiescence of Reuben, I traveled all over Johannesburg once or twice a month for over two years, gathering up donations large and small. Each little gift contained some special treasure of its own; among larger endowments, we were especially fortunate to receive some irreplaceable collections. Those of the late Nochum Winik, the late Leibl Yudaken, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and the Yiddish Cultural Federation stand out, as do the superb private libraries of the late H.W. Wedcliffe and the late Philip Lochoff. Among these books were, naturally enough, complete sets of the significant body of Yiddish writing in all genres produced in South Africa itself over a period of some eighty years. Possession of these remarkable pieces of Africana enabled me to complete one project on which I had long set my heart, and to plan another. The first was to prepare a selection of South African Yiddish short stories in English translation, with introductory biographical and explanatory material, which appeared in 1987.² The second was to compile a detailed annotated bibliography of all Yiddish writing ever published in South Africa. In both cases, Reuben Musiker was indispensable.

As boxes began to crowd in, there was of course, insufficient space: neither the library itself nor the basement stacks were yet able to house them. So I gladly offered to keep the books in my own study in the University until they could be professionally catalogued, arranged and made part of the 'proper' library.

As a result of the generosity of the Sheila Samson Fund, money became freely available to make Landau one of the finest collections of Judaica in South Africa, and the latest and best in books and periodicals had been vigorously streaming in. Now was manifestly the time to bring those Yiddish books from mourning to rejoicing, to house them with respect in the beautiful place prepared for them as their permanent home. Now they could be sorted, catalogued and shelved; now they would be revived as they ranged themselves with pride in a 'proper' library. A Yiddish-speaking cataloguer was found,

and she had started her work. The books seemed as eager to move as we were to bring them home. In my study each day they seemed to me to be rustling with impatient delight.

Then, with brutal swiftness, those who govern the University of the Witwatersrand took the decision to close down the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies as part of what is now outlandishly called its 'rationalisation exercise'.

Despite the fact that the Wits Chair of Hebrew had been in existence since 1919, having been established at the SA School of Mines and Technology long before the University had even been constituted as a University by an Act of Parliament; despite the fact that one of the world's greatest Hebrew scholars, Chief Rabbi Dr J.L. Landau, had held that chair for nearly a quarter of a century and had bequeathed his magnificent personal library to the university on his death in 1942; despite the fact that no University in the world worth the name does not offer Hebrew as a subject, Wits had decided that it had no obligation to keep this Chair, and told the Jewish community of Johannesburg that if it wanted Hebrew and Jewish Studies, it must provide *all* the necessary funding. If not, all would be shut down at the end of 1993; all would be as if it never was.

And what of the Yiddish collection, which contains over six thousand volumes, many of them treasures beyond price, and together forming one of the most comprehensive Yiddish libraries in the world? What of that passionate dream which Reuben Musiker encouraged? As far as Wits is concerned, it is over – pie in the sky, a waste of time. Why Yiddish books in Africa, when Hebrew itself is not wanted? So the Tabatznik Yiddish collection is seeking more generous sanctuary. It cannot rest at Wits – but a new home will certainly be found for it. And wherever that home might be, Reuben Musiker will be part of it, ever enthusiastic, always knowledgeable.

Reuben's involvement with Jewish Studies did not stop with promoting the Yiddish collection, however. It went much further, and can show more lasting achievements. In 1986 he was unanimously elected chairman of the South African Association of Jewish Studies, and therefore became responsible for organizing the Association's Tenth Anniversary Conference which was held at Wits in September of 1987. This was a project into which Reuben poured all his energies. With the invaluable assistance of Susie Vaccaro, then Secretary of the Friends of the Library, we formed a small organizing committee to prepare for what remains one of the best organised and most productive conferences in the sixteen-year history of the Association.

But Reuben had not yet done everything he wanted. There was to be a book – the papers delivered at the Conference were to be published in a fully refereed volume under the imprint of the Library. Reuben, in consultation with Professor I.A. Ben Yosef of UCT, selected the referees – all distinguished overseas scholars – wrote to all of them, sent them the papers, collated their evaluations, and made the selection of essays to be published. These appeared

in a handsome volume entitled *Waters Out of the Well* in 1988.³ This volume, fully accredited by the DNE, was received with the greatest enthusiasm by contributors and general readers alike. Even its belittling dismissal as 'mere hagiography' by an erstwhile colleague, then in a senior position at a well-known Jewish research centre, seemed to us further proof that it had succeeded beyond our best for it. Only undeniable success can breed undisguised envy.

This publication whetted Reuben's appetite for another. The long-awaited Jewish Studies department was just putting out its first shoots at Wits when I was approached by Minnie Schamroth, daughter of the late Leibl Feldman, to translate with a view to publication her father's 1940 Yiddish monograph on the remarkable Jewish community which flourished round the magical trade in ostrich feathers in Oudtshoorn during the early years of this century. I went to Reuben with the proposal, which included a generous undertaking on the part of the Feldman family to cover half the production costs. The result was the magnificent limited edition, published by the Friends of the Library, of *Oudtshoorn: Jerusalem of Africa* (1989).⁴

Only 250 hand-bound and individually numbered copies were printed; by the time of the book's public launch at a cocktail party in Hofmeyr House during December 1989, all these had been bought out. Inevitably, this volume too was accepted for full academic accreditation by the DNE, and the book itself has now become a valuable and sought-after piece of Africana.

One of the additional gains for the University of this ambitious venture was that the Feldman family

donated to its archives all the Leibl Feldman papers in their possession. These complemented the Richard Feldman papers, which the archives had long held; together they provide invaluable primary source material for vital years of South African history, both Jewish and general, in which both Feldman brothers played such prominent roles.

Autre temps, autre mœurs. Reuben has retired as University Librarian, and the University itself is stumbling uncertainly in an ill-defined direction. No matter. Wherever there are Jewish libraries and Jewish publications in Johannesburg, there will be found Reuben Musiker, giving to them the same dedication, the same expert supervision, the same balanced counsel as he has always done.

NOTES

1. The text of the welcoming address which I had the privilege to deliver on this occasion is published in *Jewish Affairs*, Vol.39, No.12, December 1984, pp. 64-70.
2. Sherman, J (ed.), and trans. *From A Land Far Off: South African Yiddish Stories in English Translation*. Foreword by Dan Jacobson. Cape Town: Jewish Publications - South Africa, 1987.
3. Musiker, R., and Sherman, J., eds. *Waters Out of the Well*. Johannesburg: The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988.
4. Sherman, J. (ed.) *Oudtshoorn: Jerusalem of Africa* by Leibl Feldman. Introductory Essay by Joseph Sherman. Translated by Lilian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky. Historical Notes and Commentary by John Simon. Friends of the Library, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989.

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CONFRONTING JEWISH SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITY AFTER 2000: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY SA JEWISH NOVELS

*

Marcia Leveson

In her recent autobiographical account, *A Memoir of Love and Madness* (2009), Rahla Xeneopolous wrote: "What is it with Jews and wandering? Like the lost tribes, we're scattered and flung to the four corners of the earth." And as the pace of emigration continues from South Africa, especially to Australia and Israel, the once vibrant tradition of Jewish writing has been inevitably adversely affected by the new exodus.

Among the Jewish authors, both those who have emigrated and those who have remained, certain definite trends and patterns emerge. The sample is small and it is difficult and possibly dangerous to generalize. But I do sense a change in dynamic from the writing of the last twenty years and a return – with variations – to the dynamic of an earlier period.

For example, during the uneasy period around the Second World War, when Jews felt threatened by the pro-Nazi sentiments of the 'shirt' movements and the perceived antisemitism of the government, many Jewish writers seemed to avoid using identifiable 'Jewish' elements in their writing. This resulted from a need to remain inconspicuous, but perhaps more urgently in order to overcome subliminal feelings of outsiderhood by blending into the wider culture. And we find at the present, with growing public unease among many regarding the policies of Israel, and the Lebanon and Gaza wars in particular, another period of self-examination. Recently, the experience of ambivalence and outsiderhood has for some South African Jews, for some dramatically and for others more covertly, replaced the sense of solidarity with Jewish identity and Israel. While this might be the reason why some writers choose subjects not at all connected with Jewish identity, that could also merely be a result of the absorption of Jews into mainstream society and their vivid engagement with South African and personal issues.

Sometimes the only thing that identifies a novel

or story as being 'Jewish' writing is the name of the author. Perhaps, too, some of the writers discussed might choose not to be identified as Jews. Frequently the author's 'Jewishness' is peripheral and unnecessary to the plot. In David Medalie's fine novel *The Shadow Follows* (2006), for example, chapters are titled according to the ten plagues and there are some very minor Jewish characters. But this is not 'Jewish' writing. Nor is Stephen Finn's fascinating and original *Soliloquy* (2009). Erica Emdon's novel, *Jelly Dog Days* (2009) is a searing expose of child abuse, imaginatively reconstructed from interviews, and has not a Jew in sight.

Paradoxically, among the majority of Jewish writers there has recently been a marked celebration of Jewishness, the retrieval of the past of the *shtetl*, of the struggle and success of the immigrants in South Africa. This trend – combining memory and imagination – started way back in the 1960s with Dan Jacobson's saga of family life, *The Beginners* (1966). Perhaps it is significant that Jacobson had by then long emigrated and had the freedom to use a long lens. It was continued by Rose Zwi, who also emigrated, in her novels of the 1980s.

Often a first novel, or at least one major novel, is an epic, a *bildungsroman*, and the continuum leads from Eastern Europe, thorough the early years in South Africa, and now even on to the perils of making a go of things after emigrating, usually to Australia. If overdone, this could easily become a cliché, although to read about and revel in the stories of our ancestors is a basic human need, and in South Africa this has been particularly successful.

Maja Kriel's *Rings in a Tree* (2004) – an often poetical and finely imagined family saga stretching from Eastern Europe to the present – was the first of a number that followed. In Patricia Schonstein: *A Quilt of Dreams*, (2006), set in Grahamstown during the political unrest of the 1980s, the main character is Reuben (Baby) Cohen van Tonder – note the significance of the conflation of the Jewish and Afrikaans name. The centre of the novel treats Reuben's immigrant Jewish grandparents, and the plot stretches from *Kristallnacht* to the fate of the Cradock Four. Hazel Frankel's tense and disturbing *Counting Sleeping Beauties* (2009) cleverly weaves the past of the *shtetl* with the present and, significantly, with the lives of black servants who were and are still

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so much part of South African suburbia. Given the facts of South African life, this drive to integrate black and Jewish experience in the 'quilt' of South African experience will no doubt continue for a while.

It may be that the current emphasis on repossession of the past has been encouraged by the work the Kaplan Centre in Cape Town and Beyachad in Johannesburg. It would also seem to be connected to a sense of urgency with the past is fast retreating. Perhaps, too, in the new political disposition, there is a freedom from former restraints and a new confidence to write about a particular ethnic past.

And hence, too, the impulse to explore the narratives of the elders, even to uncover or imagine family secrets of the *shtetl* or in South Africa. The 1950s seems to be the preferred period for fiction, seemingly because it was a time of upward mobility for the Jews, with one foot still in Eastern Europe of the grandparents, and another confronting a changing society.

Frequently there is the secret story of forbidden love, either in *der heim* or among the white employers and black servants, or incest, or homosexual encounters. Barry Levy's startling *Burning Bright* (2004) is an example. Joanne Fedler's first novel before her emigration - *The Dreamcloth* (2005) - is another. And Charles Cohen's magnificent *People have stolen from me* (2004), with a strong basis in historical fact, is a commentary, not so much on Jewish experience but on the state of South Africa today, particularly aspects of crime. Cohen has also emigrated and he has expressed his own sense of the freedom being outside South Africa gives him to write with objectivity as well as intimacy.

Another prominent current trend is of writing at least part, often a major part, of the novel from the point of view or in the voice of a child. Besides Finn and Emdon's work, included in this category are Kriel's *Rings in a Tree* and Frankel's *Counting Sleeping Beauties*, as well as Tony Epirile's aptly named *The Persistence of Memory* (2004) and Anne Landsman's much acclaimed second novel, *The Rowing Boat* (2009). Landsman has long lived in New York and has eloquently expressed how her novels - like so many others at the present time - have been inspired by childhood memories and nostalgia. At times, the use of a child narrator works very well, but I feel that the authors often struggle to find an authentic voice. The problem arises, I think, from the current fashion to write in the first person (and even the second person) and in the present tense. This is technically tricky to sustain and gives rise to all sorts of false notes, while the subject matter itself dealt with by our young novelists is almost invariably deeply moving and significant.

With the acceleration emigration, the writers often tell their tale for the global market. Some of the new works by contemporary Jewish writers contain a glossary of Yiddish, Afrikaans and Sotho words. Yiddish is no longer one of the shameful stigmata of the Jew, but here retrieved as the language of beloved grandparents. Afrikaans, too - so strongly part of the

fabric of our growing up - filters into a number of novels, together with an almost mandatory use of black languages. It seems that from a distance, either of time - post-1994, or of place - the new diaspora, the Jew looks back to the South Africa of his growing up with no sense of vulnerability, and instead of choosing or fearing difference, claims belonging.

David Smiedt's *Are we there Yet? Chasing a Childhood Through South Africa* (2004) is not a novel, but points to a new trend. It is a travelogue of South Africa from an émigré, now returned as a visitor, viewing it with the eyes of a stranger who is yet a familiar. The love/hate relationship with the old country is plain here. There is no longer a desire to belong, but more urgently a need to defend the choice to emigrate.

But among the solemnity one finds a refreshing humor. Smiedt, Cohen and others lace their satire with fun and a lightness of touch. Mona Berman's witty *Email from a Jewish mother* (2001) and *Email from a Jewish Grandmother* (2008) may well be prophetic of a new trend. Children and parents now keep in touch by email and Skype. Is this the new writing? In fact, will South African Jewish fiction survive as we have known it, or is a new trend of instant communication threatening to eclipse our proud tradition?



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SUSAN WOOLF IN SPOTLIGHT FOR 2010 WORLD CUP

*

Suzanne Belling

Susan Woolf is known as Mathabo (Mother of Happiness) by the people and taxi commuters of the streets of South Africa to whom she has introduced a concept that will change their lives.

She lives up to the credo in her personalised definition of art as a combination of creative and lateral thinking. In fact, her view on life, her skills and her multi-faceted talents have been put to use in such unique ways that she defined taxi hand signals as a whole new language, creating one for unsighted people into the bargain.

Woolf is a former student of the Johannesburg School of Art. Her Masters degree from the Johannesburg Technikon featured her five storey high aluminium mobile installation for Absa Bank, in collaboration with two architects. Through her art she now explores the previously undefined language of gestures deployed by millions of commuters in Gauteng and the other major centres in this country.

Her paintings of the taxi hand sign are schematic – in colours other than the skin tones of the peoples of our country, for the hands are non-discriminatory and gloved. This led to her production of a taxi hand sign booklet, complete hand signs, destinations and with maps of taxi routes.

Woolf has also designed simple tactile shapes that combine and code for all the taxi hand signs for blind people. It precedes the pocket-size booklet for sighted people as part of the thesis's practical outreach that builds towards a shared social community endeavour. Shape recognition is often taught to visually impaired learners and, in a way, stands as a precursor to Braille learning. An educational component of workshops will correspond with the SA Post Office launch of the taxi hand signs for sighted and blind people on the SA National commemorative stamp for 2010. It includes ten stamps and two first day covers.

The taxi hand signs are incorporated in Mercia Strieman's *On the Ball - Getting to know you*, an information book and guide for tourists to the various centres where the 2010 World Cup matches will be held.

Woolf's art took on social connotations in the 1980s when she was invited to the Carter Presidential Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, and undertook a project designed to draw attention to the hostel crises of that

decade. Together with Lesley Price and Steven Sack, she brought an exhibition "South African Art to Atlanta: Common and Uncommon Ground" to the 1996 Cultural Olympiad and Atlanta Olympic games.

For eleven years, her art studio was in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, on the top floor of a warehouse. Her route home every afternoon was along Louis Botha Avenue, and the idea for her taxi arts project was born when she saw taxi commuters using their hands to signal the many taxis plying the route.

In her "Taxi Hand Signs in Social Spaces", Woolf expands as follows on she calls "a discourse analysis of taxi hand signs in Gauteng between language and aesthetics":

Millions of commuters all over South Africa use taxi hand signs as a way of indicating their intended destination to the over 15 000 taxi drivers in the country. Over the past thirty years, until 2009, there has been a decline of the public bus services resulting in the private but organised taxi transport sector taking over many routes within Gauteng.

You have to have your wits about you to drive on Louis Botha Avenue, as hundreds of minibuses taxis driving north and south weave in and out of traffic at will, hooting in perpetual 'beeps' to attract the commuters' attention. Taxi drivers stop any place on the road, double-park, ignore no-go areas and yellow lines or block the flow of traffic for as long as it takes to pick up passengers along the way.

I became increasingly aware of the many people gesturing to the taxi drivers with different hand signs, not only on Louis Botha Avenue, but all over the city. I was fascinated, curious and frankly in awe that such an obviously successful, intrinsically South African form of interaction existed. I wondered how many signs there were, and when and by whom these signs were learned and communicated. Had the destinations and hand signs been documented? Why was this silent taxi sign language adopted yet taken for granted by so many different travellers? Are these taxi hand signs a curiosity for people who have their own means of transport? Do motorists even notice others signalling?

Woolf pondered on whether taxi hand signs constituted a language and how this form of communication compared to other established

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gestural languages, like sign language. She wondered if blind people took taxis and knew that commuters were using hand signals to alert taxi drivers:

I thought it would be a fascinating investigation for a social arts project and began to record on paper some of the hand signs I was seeing. My art has always had a social aspect to it, and as usual I started my research hardly knowing where to begin or where it would lead. My first objective was to determine and document all the taxi hand signs and their associated destinations, while the more interesting aspects of the phenomenon of taxi hand signs would be gleaned through a broader and deeper research strategy.

There appeared to be parallels in the research and social, community-based art investigation and aspects of anthropological exploration. Anthropological methodology and transcription would provide a solid, more accurate base through the research methodology. The *gestalt* from the experiences and knowledge gained in the field would augment the findings of the taxi hand signs as a specific South African phenomenon and allow for a more broadly communicative outcome in further encouraging an understanding between different sectors of the community.

Thus Woolf's approach to Professor Carel Nel, of the University of the Witwatersrand, led to her starting the first cross-disciplinary arts and anthropology doctoral thesis at Wits. The thesis investigates taxi hand signs and corresponding destinations through dialogical social interventionist art and engaging sampling and semi-structured investigative methods of anthropology.

Her book for SA Libraries, published in 2007, will be updated each year as the thesis research progresses. She has designed a system of shapes to code for all the taxi hand signs. The "Taxi Hand Signs Book for the Blind" was launched on 30 September, 2009, at the exhibition *l'Afrique* at Museum Africa [see Lana Jacobson's article 'l'Afrique: A Tribute to Maria Stein-Lessing and Leopold Spiegel' in the Pesach 2009 issue of *Jewish Affairs* – Ed.]. A pocket-size booklet for sighted people was completed and launched in January 2010.

The objectives of Woolf's thesis are *inter alia*:

- To identify taxi hand signs in Gauteng and the destinations they indicate.
- Define and specify how taxi hand signs are visible in the city as a silent gestural language, one that communicates in a way that has become a distinctive visual logo for Gauteng.
- Design symbols that code for all the taxi hand signs for blind people.
- Compare taxi hand signs to other gestural

hand sign languages and provide a parallel between specific corresponding deaf language signs.

- Make explicit taxi hand sign origins, meanings and/or connections geographically, historically, politically or culturally within the context of the community of South Africa and particularly that of Gauteng.
- Use the anthropological field methods of participant-observation, sampling and semi-structured interviews.
- As a social interventionist arts endeavour, to create a performative space in which the community (taxi drivers and commuters) can engage in conversations around the history, significations and social implications of taxi hand signs. This will be incorporated in a documentary arts film along with the data collected from the overall research. The conceptual framework for the film is still being developed.

According to Woolf, scholars and researchers have recently written on the undeniable link between contemporary art and anthropology, particularly in the area of research methods:

Literature on contemporary art and anthropology in this review aims to support a personal research objective: to illustrate the successful integration of anthropological methodology with my own investigative arts project on taxi hand signs and their corresponding routes.

Schneider and Wright propose that "anthropologists are increasingly wary of the assumption that text and language are the only paradigms for understanding and explanation" (Schneider and Wright 2008:8), and suggest that there are other ways by which meaning can be revealed apart from exclusively translating and decoding texts (Schneider and Wright 2006:8). I propose that, through collaboration with other disciplines in the sciences and the arts appropriate to the project at hand, such endeavours may reach a far wider audience and be more holistic and accurate.

Anthropology requires that the observer also be a participant in the field. Social interventionist art requires a similar commitment as the artist engages with the community through enquiry, creative and interactive input and communication critically - also through actual art outputs such as artworks or film. Theory found in Schneider and Wright's *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* provides the intellectual context I am looking for in order to position my thesis relative to the context of anthropology and art. They propose that while anthropologists study other cultures,

artists have been understood to be adding something to their own culture (2006:24). An arts intervention in uncharted territory such as taxi hand signs incorporates aspects of anthropology in the research methodology and is a study of a 'melting pot' of a variety of cultures. At the same time, it adds to a further understanding between diverse cultures in the context of South African society.

Woolf feels her study will reveal the way in which artists have understood, communicated and contributed to society by unusual or alternative methods of engagement and communication.

Details of the final arts/anthropological portfolio will emerge, she believes, as the research, artworks and documentary film develop. Furthermore, the documentary film, portfolio of images and transcriptions from the research processes, and interactions and conversations within the community would "collectively contribute to a complete arts portfolio."

Woolf argues that the taxi hand gestures are in themselves a kind of movement and performance which codes and denotes the city. Her thesis attempts to identify and delineate how these signs make the city legible. In constituting a language that communicates, they have become a visual logo for Gauteng. It is important to note that she addresses cultural and language barriers as the communities' shared stories and collective voices will be heard and transcribed. English is often not a respondent's first language, she says:

Addressing the topic of taxi hand signs is timeous because they are continuously evolving. Despite controversies raging at present over taxis and the new rapid bus transport system, it is expected and planned that taxis will be one of the main forms of transport to the FIFA World Cup soccer games in 2010. However, my aim is that the artworks, transcription in the thesis, books and film that document taxi hand signs, be recorded historically over time. This must be communicated to the general public as a celebration of and insight into an innovative, practical creative travel language invented by the taxi commuting public in South Africa.



A SOUTH AFRICAN ZIONIST SUCCESS STORY: REEVA FORMAN'S 'ISRAEL NOW' TOURS

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David Saks

The downside of Israel's hotels being so full throughout the year, Reeva Forman quips, is that it is no longer possible to obtain from them the discounted rates that were available to her tour groups a few years ago. Indeed, Israel today is thankfully very different from what it was back in November 2002, when she and fifty others were in the country to take part in the inaugural 'Israel Now' tour she had organised. The post-Oslo terror war launched by the Palestinians two years previously was then at its height, and empty hotels, restaurants and parking lots provided stark testimony to how much it had hit Israel's tourism industry.

The harm to Israel was not just economic, but psychological as well. The Israeli people felt alone, even abandoned, during what was a particularly traumatic time for them. Not only were terrorist attacks, actual and planned, having to be dealt with on a daily basis, but the mood of the world at large was turning increasingly ugly in the way it viewed the Jewish State.

Reeva Forman's long career in Jewish communal service had not until then been particularly Israel-focused. Like most South African Jews, she cared deeply for Israel, had visited it and contributed as a matter of course to Zionist causes, but had not actually been active on local Zionist platforms. Now, motivated by a deep-seated need to learn for herself what was happening rather than rely on perennially biased media reports and at the same time to convey a message of support to the Israeli people, she came to a decision that would both change her own life and introduce a dynamic new dimension to the relationship between Israel and South African Jewry.

What the situation called for, Forman realised, was for the creation of a vehicle through which local supporters of Israel could show solidarity with the embattled Israeli people, combined with a focused programme enabling them at the same time to learn at first hand what was happening in the region. These twin aims – solidarity and education – were what underpinned the rationale for the first-ever Israel Now tour from South Africa that she put together. Fifty people divided roughly equally between Johannesburg and Cape Town participated, in some cases with the assistance of sponsors. The tour was regarded as a resounding success. The group met with a range of political and civil society leaders, academics and opinion makers representing a broad range of political views and visited various important

sites throughout the country, thereby returning considerably better informed about the complexities of the conflict and the challenges Israel faced.

Their just being there, moreover, had been greatly appreciated, something constantly conveyed to them by the Israelis with whom they met.

The first Israel Now tour was conceived as a one-off vehicle through which South African Jews could show their solidarity with Israel by actually being there at a time when tourists were generally staying away and also find out from Israelis themselves rather than from slanted media reports what was happening there. Instead, it had demonstrated that there was an ongoing need for visits of this kind, both for Israel and for Jews in South Africa (as well as for non-Jewish supporters of Israel, a number of whom would take part in later tours). Soon after her return, Forman was planning a follow-up trip, which eventually took place in May the following year. Since then, every calendar year has included at least one Israel Now tour. Forman, in addition to her position on the SA Jewish Board of Deputies (Gauteng Council), also sits on the SA Zionist Federation Executive, holding the Israel Now portfolio.

Showing solidarity is no longer as pressing a need as before, although it remains a significant motivating factor. In 2008, for example, the main focus of the programme was to participate in Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations. The largest group yet, comprising 80 people, were able to share the joy and pride of the Israeli people countrywide in marking sixty years of growth and achievement.

Learning about Israel, its relationship with its neighbours and the ongoing quest for peace in the region remains as important as ever. The tour programme itself has evolved as the situation on the ground in the Middle East has changed. Thus, the November 2007 programme focused on Israel's relationship with its neighbours, featuring amongst other things a first-ever visit to Jordan, as guests of the Jordanian government's agricultural division. Here, they learned about joint Israeli-Jordanian projects such as the Jewish National Fund's working with its Jordanian counterparts in combating the fruit fly problem. Last November, the itinerary included a day trip to Turkey to meet the Jewish community and its leadership. It had been both inspiring and fascinating, says Forman, to have made contact with another Diaspora community, one that in addition to its rich and venerable history had such strong historic ties to Israel.

Jordan and Israel have, of course, been at peace for nearly twenty years now, and there is extensive

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cooperation between the two countries. What Forman finds particularly inspiring is the still little known extent of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in the West Bank that has emerged in recent years. There are, she notes, a remarkable number of NGOs, Jewish and non-Jewish, working across the board to pave a way to peaceful co-existence. With political developments at the leadership level having reached a stalemate, people were beginning to focus on what was happening on the ground. Israelis and Jews around the world were putting considerable funds and expertise into development projects, thereby sharing in and helping stimulate the current economic boom in the West Bank. In its upcoming tour in May, the Israel Now tour group will visit Ramallah for the first time to see these encouraging developments for themselves and meet with Jewish people working there.

The most important focus of the next tour will be how Israel is grappling with the position of minority

groups within the State itself. Today, even more than the Palestinian relationship, this is an issue that particularly concerns Israelis. Six days of the tour will take place in Jerusalem, which is a particular area of concern at present. Other important centres that will be visited are S'derot on the Gaza border, the Arab-Jewish Centre for Peace in Tel Aviv, the Golan Heights and the Gush Etzion community across the Green Line. There will also be archaeological tours in Jerusalem given by the renowned Israeli archaeologist Dan Bahat and a visit to Yad Vashem.

Forman concludes that what was ultimately so inspiring about visiting Israel was to see manifested in so many ways the goodness of the Jewish heart looking to do good to those less fortunate.

Those wishing to learn more about currently planned and future Israel Now tours can contact Reeve Forman at reeva@intekom.co.za.



South African Jews show their support for Israel at a solidarity rally in Johannesburg, 2006.

THE KAPLAN CENTRE FOR JEWISH STUDIES AT UCT: AN ENDURING LEGACY

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Milton Shain

Editor's note: International Jewry, and South African Jewry in particular, were stunned by the sudden death of Mendel Kaplan on 19 November last year. Tributes quickly poured in for a remarkable man, one who had put his formidable gifts at the disposal of the Jewish world and enriched it in innumerable ways.

In its obituary message placed in the general media, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies stressed the extraordinary scope of Kaplan's achievements:

The SA Jewish Board of Deputies pays whole-hearted tribute to you, Mendel. Yours was a remarkable life, a noble saga of selfless, unstinting service to the Jewish people. Few have accomplished as much as you did in enriching and strengthening the Jewish world, particularly in the country of your birth. We mourn your sudden loss, but are comforted by the knowledge that your multiple achievements on behalf of *Klal Yisrael* live on. May your memory be a blessing and your example a shining source of inspiration for generations to come.

In his condolence letter to the Kaplan family, SAJBD National Chairman Zev Krenkel noted that while South African Jewry had been blessed by the many other fine men and women who had devoted themselves heart and soul to serving the Jewish people, Mendel had been something special:

Few indeed can have given so much, in so very many fields, to the greater Jewish cause. Blessed with prodigious gifts, whether in the financial, intellectual or leadership realms, he never ceased to put them at the disposal of his beloved people and their precious heritage. He enriched us all, put steel into our collective backbone and left us a priceless legacy that will endure for generations to come.

This article Milton Shain focuses on one aspect of Mendel Kaplan's enduring legacy, the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town which he endowed and remained intricately involved with.

Mendel Kaplan once told me that the key to success was focus. I witnessed it in all his efforts. Details concerned him greatly, but he never lost sight of the big picture. Indeed, he created the big picture. Mendel was hugely involved in matters Jewish, with a stellar record in service and leadership. He initiated, led and funded numerous Jewish, Zionist and other projects in South Africa and throughout the Jewish world. He was honorary president of Keren Hayesod and a former chairman of the Jewish Agency's Board of Governors. And he was also a greatly respected industrialist. While I know little about Cape Gate, the family business Mendel's father Isaac founded 80 years ago, as Director of the Isaac and Jessie

Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT) since 1994, I have been privileged to have worked closely with Mendel.

The Centre was established in 1980 under the terms of a gift to UCT by the Kaplan Kushlick Foundation and was named in honour of the parents of Mendel and Robert Kaplan. The Centre, the only one of its kind in South Africa, was founded to stimulate and promote the field of Jewish studies and research at the University. Mendel was acutely aware of the importance of an academic Jewish education. He was particularly fascinated with the South African Jewish experience and indeed contributed to our knowledge in this area through numerous books and scholarly articles.

Mendel's initiative to create an academic Jewish Centre at UCT was greatly influenced by the vision of Professor Moshe Davis, operating in the late 1970s at the International Centre for the Teaching of Jewish Civilization under the auspices of the Presidency of the State of Israel. 'Davis felt that Jewish Studies should not be contained within a

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specialised Department', recalled Mendel on the occasion of the Kaplan Centre's twenty-fifth anniversary. He believed Jewish Studies 'should be available to all Departments and disciplines within the University that could relate to aspects of Jewish Civilization. He therefore envisaged teaching the Jewish experience as a part of wider cultural and historical studies and in appropriate departments'.

In line with Mendel's vision, and informed by Davis's insights, the Centre has, from its inception, stimulated and promoted the whole field of Jewish studies and research at UCT. It has evolved a multidisciplinary outlook, encouraging the participation of scholars in a range of fields including history, political science, education, sociology, comparative literature and the broad spectrum of Hebrew and Judaic studies. Its resources are used to invite distinguished scholars to teach Jewish-content courses within established University departments, to initiate and sponsor research projects, to publish monographs and occasional papers, to hold international and local conferences, to invite scholars to participate in the annual UCT 'Summer School', under the auspices of the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, and to strengthen the university's library holding of books, microfilms and visual and archival sources.

Within this context, a new generation of young scholars with an academic background in Jewish affairs has emerged, among them communal professionals and teachers. To this end the Centre funds research and awards scholarships. Students are privileged to interact with luminaries at the cutting edge of their fields and disciplines. Since the Rachel Bloch House was completed in 1989, they have enjoyed a unique environment including prayer facilities in the Beth Hamedrash, vibrant Jewish learning opportunities enriched by the services of a Chaplain, as well as a kosher canteen efficiently managed by Brenda Kammy. Few universities can lay claim to such an array of activities as those

offered by the Centre.

Over the years the Centre has shared in co-operative research with institutions abroad, most recently with the University of Southampton's Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations. In March 2010 a publication arising from one of the joint conferences - *Zakor v'Makor: Place and Displacement in Jewish History and Memory*, edited by David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and Milton Shain, and published by Valentine Mitchell - was runner-up in the category for 'Anthologies and Collections' in the highly prestigious National Jewish Book Award in the United States.

The Centre's capacity and publication output is invigorated by Research Associates and augmented by its own publishing arm, *Jewish Publications-South Africa*. The Centre's work is further enhanced by a fine library headed by Veronica Belling. We are particularly proud of the Duker and Rajak collections, as well as a range of rare items and a rich manuscript collection including the Sammy Marks Papers, professionally managed and controlled by the Manuscripts Division of UCT led by Lesley Hart.

Beyond formal teaching and research, the Centre has mounted exhibitions, usually on subjects relating to South African Jewry. In this regard we collaborate closely with the South African Jewish Museum, a world-class heritage centre in the Company Gardens, yet another initiative of Mendel and Robert Kaplan. 'Helen Suzman. Fighter for Human Rights' - an exhibition researched and written by Millie Pimstone, with graphics by Linda Bester - is currently touring the United States.

In 2002 the Centre established the Migration and Genealogy Project, guided by Dr Saul Issroff and generously supported by David Susman. Here we are building a comprehensive database, driven by the Centre's administrator, Janine Blumberg, of South African Jewish immigration. We aim to map the entire SA Jewish community and provide authoritative and definitive data for the Discovery



Mendel Kaplan taking President Nelson Mandela around the SA Jewish Museum.

Centre at the SA Jewish Museum. We envisage the data providing opportunities for interdisciplinary research focusing on the places of origin of SA Jewish families, patterns of migration to South Africa, the nature of the communities they established, family histories, and subsequent movements.

Mendel's deep engagement with the Centre, his ideas and his vision, has informed much of the Centre's priorities. While we have focused on the South African Jewish experience, other aspects of the Jewish past and present are not ignored. All initiatives are subject to the approval of the Centre's Board that includes representatives of the Kaplan family, Jewish communal leaders and UCT academics. Mendel was always present at these meetings. He knew balance sheets were not my strongest suit and would leave that alone. Projects, conferences and research were the subjects that really interested him. There were no formalities; it was down to business. Mendel laughed at the stuffiness of university mores. With uncanny business acumen and total recall, he was able to juggle a myriad of activities and projects with mesmerizing precision.

Mendel's law degree from the University of Cape Town and his Master's in Business Administration from Columbia University in New York no doubt stood him in great stead. But it was his creativity, vision and focus that set him apart. A working lunch on his lovely patio overlooking False Bay in Cape Town would always be interrupted by

calls from abroad - the Jerusalem Zoo, an Israeli cabinet minister, or an old friend from school. Mendel was always three steps ahead. He provided direction and ideas, but he also appreciated contestation. Exchanges were often tense but always underpinned by loyalty.

Without the vision and foresight of Mendel Kaplan and the generous assistance of the Kaplan Kushlick Foundation, academic Jewish learning at UCT would have been deeply compromised. Without his input, we would not have been able to translate a vision into a reality. Mendel conceived of the Centre, supported it with passion and provided thoughtful and incomparable guidance. He inspired the Centre's agenda and activities. When he set his mind to something, he was unstoppable. He had a passion for matters Jewish. A deeply spiritual man, he was always reading, learning and writing. His most recent book, written for his grandchildren, recorded his travels as a young man in East Africa.

I know the Centre meant much to Mendel, although it was only one of many flourishing ventures he created in a life dedicated to the Jewish people, to Israel, to family and to the less fortunate, both Jewish and non-Jewish. He will be sorely missed. As Director of the Kaplan Centre for the past fifteen years, I gained enormously from Mendel's insights and refreshing ideas. Today the Centre enjoys national and international recognition. We can justly be proud of our achievements. The Centre will continue to flourish in his memory.

WOOLWORTHS

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REV PULVER'S PLIGHT: KOSHER MEAT OR A COMPLACENT CONGREGATION?

*

Gwynne Schrire

Jews living in the British Colonies in the 19th Century were generally proud to be British citizens. They appreciated being able to live in peace, religious tolerance and security and were satisfied to accept the institutions and practices that British citizenship entailed. This included acceptance of the British concepts of religious leadership, which centred very much on the person of the rabbi of the Great Synagogue in London. The latter was recognised and deferred to as the chief rabbi and, from 1845, was officially designated Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire.¹ Among the Chief Rabbi's functions was the appointment of rabbis, even to places as far from London as the Cape Colony or New Zealand.²

In 1804 the Batavian Republic, through Governor de Mist, established freedom of worship at the Cape, but it was not until 1841 that there were sufficient Jews for the first Jewish minyan to be organised. Following the establishment of Tikvath Israel, the fledgling Society of the Jewish community of Cape Town, on 26 September of that year, it was decided to import a *Sefer Torah* through trading contacts in Frankfurt. It was then discovered that without the permission of the Chief Rabbi, Dr Solomon Herschell, no *Sefer Torah* could be sent to the Colony.

Unfortunately, the Chief Rabbi died before permission could be obtained. The new congregation then launched a collection for a memorial prayer-offering in his name, collecting £3 on behalf of the Cape Town and Grahamstown communities. In the meantime, they managed without the *Sefer Torah*.

Since their arrival in the Cape, the handful of Jewish settlers had had no contact with any *halachic* authority and there was much they did not know. Indeed, it was not easy to be Jewish in the Cape Colony at that time. There was no *Sefer Torah*, no *tallit*, no rabbi, no *mohel*, no *shochet*, no *mikveh*, no kosher food and no *cheder*. There was no one to assist with dietary advice or requirements; members had to conduct services to the best of their abilities and weddings had to be performed by a Christian minister. In 1843, the Tikvath Israel committee agreed that they should keep in touch with the new Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Dr Nathan Marcus Adler. When they had problems, they would write to him and after

about three months, depending on the weather and the availability of ships, would receive his reply.

After struggling like this for a further two years, Benjamin Norden and Nathan Birkenruth suggested that an approach be made to officials in England or Germany for a minister. However, the committee turned down their proposal. A rabbi, they believed, was a luxury the small congregation could not afford.³

In 1846 R E Joseph, a qualified *mohel*, arrived in Cape Town. That solved one problem. He brought with him letters from Chief Rabbi Adler advising them to get a minister as soon as possible and acquire a synagogue. That caused another problem, and the financial implications split the community. Finally, they agreed to purchase a property to serve as a synagogue and to that end bought two houses and a store at the corner of Bouquet Street and St Johns Street adjoining the Lodge De Goede Hoop.⁴ Today a plaque on a building marks the site.

In June 1848 Aaron de Pass (whose brother, Elias, was the congregation's Honorary Secretary), arrived at the synagogue on his return from a visit to England, carrying two letters from the Chief Rabbi and a parcel containing a *Sefer Torah*. One letter advised that Mr. P Salaman had kindly donated the Torah; the other urged them to get a rabbi from England.

The *Sefer Torah* was received with delight and a thank-you letter was despatched to Mr. Salaman, but



Rev Isaac Pulver, 1803 - 1873

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the financial worries remained. After arguing for a month, the congregation agreed to ask the Chief Rabbi to send a rabbi. They specified that they could not pay him more than £100 a year, but would defray the cost of the ocean passage and provide free quarters. They also requested a *tallit* and a Code of Law.

In time, the answer arrived. The Chief Rabbi recommended Rev Isaac Pulver, minister of the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation, for the post. At a special meeting, it was agreed that the Tikvath Israel congregation would bring out Rev Pulver, his wife and children. Rev Pulver would not have to repay the passage money and a furnished house would be provided for his family until a house attached to the synagogue was ready.

On 8 August 1849, Rev Pulver arrived in Cape Town as the reader, *shochet* and *mohel* for the young Cape Town Hebrew Congregation. A delighted Benjamin Norden held a reception at his home to welcome their first minister, at which another letter from the Chief Rabbi was read out. This instructed the Jewish community of the Cape to give heed to the Minister's government.

Rev Pulver then delivered a short address exhorting the community to assist him "in carrying out the laws for establishing the true religion of the G-d of Israel",⁵ and a month later, on 15 September, he consecrated the first synagogue in South Africa.

However, the Chief Rabbi's instruction to heed the minister's government proved an onerous burden for the few Jewish colonists living in the Cape Colony. The congregation had become used to living without following the demands of *halachah* and found it difficult to observe the *mitzvot*, many of which had fallen into abeyance. This included the observance of *kashrut*. Before Rev Pulver's arrival, no kosher meat had been obtainable. The local Jews either ate *treife* meat, or did without.

As the first minister to a pioneering community established only eight years earlier, and one that had been managing comfortably to live a life independent of religious authority, Rev Pulver had a difficult task. Naturally, he was a religious man. Naturally, he observed the commandments and expected to live, as he had before, in a community of like-minded Orthodox Jews. He therefore found the ways of his congregation a considerable culture shock. In as much as his community found it difficult to cope with the sudden religious expectations imposed on the assimilated life style to which they had become accustomed, Rev Pulver found it difficult to cope with the non-Orthodox life style prevalent in his congregation. What he wanted - a *mikvah*, *matzah*, kosher meat - his community did not want. Friction was inevitable.

At first, the committee tried to assist him. A special sub-committee was set up to discuss building a *mikvah*,⁶ but apathy and lack of money put paid to that. A supply of *matzah* was imported from England for Passover. With regard to kosher meat, arrangements were made with a firm of butchers for their new minister to practice *Shechita*.

For the first time, it was possible to obtain kosher

meat in Cape Town. However, the supply of that meat was a problem. It was one thing to buy *matzah* as a one-off purchase, but agreeing to commit oneself to buying more expensive kosher meat on a regular basis was a different matter entirely. To adapt an idiom, you can lead a congregation to water but you cannot make it drink. Rev Pulver had endless trouble getting kosher meat, and when the meat was available, the congregation did not want to buy it. Without the support of the community, it proved difficult for him to provide a constant supply of kosher meat to the few who did want it.⁷

There were no freezers, and when there were no customers, the butcher was left with decomposing meat. As a result, butchers were unwilling to provide kosher meat. This was a serious problem for Rev Pulver and his family.

The very prospect of being compelled by circumstances to keep a table that was not strictly kosher was a source of the greatest pain to the good man, who was, above all, an orthodox Jew. On the other hand the Colonists, from the circumstances of their lives, could not regard the rigid observance of Jewish ceremony with the same reverence, or attach quite the same importance to it as he did.⁸

So the Rev Pulver entered into negotiations with local Muslim butchers, who appreciated his problem and were willing to allow him to kill sheep (although rarely, if ever, a bullock).⁹

It is of interest to see the degree of co-operation and friendship that existed at this time between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Cape Town.

Differences in expectations between the minister and his small congregation (some thirty men with their wives and families) and money problems caused tension, and the congregation accordingly started to shrink. Frustrated, Rev Pulver wrote to Chief Rabbi Adler for advice. At the same time, he took the opportunity to ask him to find him a position in Australia, where there were settled Jewish communities. Services had been held in private homes there since the 1820s, the first formal congregation was established in November 1831 by Rabbi Aaron Levy and the first purpose-built synagogue was built in Sydney in 1844.¹⁰

Amazingly, the copy of the Chief Rabbi's reply to Rev Pulver in the Cape Colony has survived in America, where it was recently discovered in the Jewish Theological Seminary Archives in New York by historian Dr Adam Mendelsohn.¹¹ This was a remarkable find because, seventy years earlier, Chief Rabbi Dr JH Herz had informed Louis Herrman that none of the correspondence between the early Cape Town Jewish community and the Chief Rabbi was extant.¹² Fifty years later John Simon confirmed this, having investigated the archives of the Chief Rabbinate, the Mocatta Library at University College and the Landau Archives at the Hebrew Library looking for such correspondence and found that nothing from the period between 1841 and 1885 had survived.¹³

The letter reads as follows:

April 12 5610¹⁴

Rev I Pulver

Cape Town

My dear sir,

It was with greatest anxiety that I expected from you particular statements about your reception and the congregational affairs in Cape Town. But though the delay was long, I was the more gratified by the principle points of your letter of December last. I could not but feel the greatest satisfaction from the facts that you have succeeded in finishing and consecrating the synagogue before the yomim tovim, and in convincing nearly all the community of the holiness of the Sabbath and of the duty of its strict observance. I therefore highly regret with you, that the political agitation,¹⁵ which prevailed in your colony during the last months, has thrown a general disharmony into the general unanimity of our brethren, and threatens to prevent the steady progress of the congregational welfare. Under these circumstances it is my most anxious wish, that a reconciliation agreeable with Mr Norden (whose influential example is, I confess, of the highest weight, may be effected); and the same way as I expect, you will make your most decided exertions in order to produce that desirable result, I shall not omit any possible effort in my power to contribute to that aim, for which I have already begun the first steps, and which I shall earnestly prosecute.

With the same regret I deplore the difficulties you find in providing the congregation with a proper shechitah. But it has always been the glory of our faith, that its followers have not been deterred by difficulties however unsurmountable [sic] they might appear. You will as little destroy one of the pillars of Judaism, as I can give my sanction to it; and therefore I hope you will not be discouraged, if I do not allow [you] to use the meat killed by the Malay Priest under any circumstances which is against the mitzvah chaf-vav-lamed-yud-nun.¹⁶ But on the other hand there is no objection to allow the Malay Priest to say whatever formula he pleases provided that you will perform the shechitah according to our rite. Perhaps you may succeed on making an arrangement on this basis.

It is with great pleasure that I acquaint you that a subscription in aid of the funds of your congregation has been prepared here by Mr De Pass and that the amount will be transmitted to your wardens as soon as it may have led to a certain result.¹⁷

Although the office at Sydney is not yet occupied, I hope you will not abandon your present situation - even if there is more prospect for you to obtain the situation at Sydney than there really is - as you must feel that your leaving Cape Town would bring a dangerous crisis into the whole existence of your congregation, and as I feel convinced, that all the difficulties and the

unpleasantness of your position (which, I hope, may have considerably decreased by the happy termination of the political differences in your colony) will be removed with the aid of G-d and with the moral courage on your part, which boldly looks at difficulties, when great and holy aims are to be reached.

With my most fervent wishes for the welfare of your congregation especially, which may flourish and joyfully grow under the protection of the Almighty, and of the whole colony in general.¹⁸

Accordingly, the Rev Pulver made arrangements with the Malay priest, and when he managed to slaughter an ox or a sheep he informed the handful of congregants that he knew would be interested in buying kosher meat. That caused more trouble because those who had not been offered a supply felt slighted and complained to the committee. The committee asked for a written explanation. Rev Pulver explained that he had made the arrangements with the Muslim butcher because he could not get a regular supply of meat from the butchers with whom the congregation had negotiated as they had complained that the kosher meat remained unsold.

Offended that the Rev Pulver had made his own arrangements unilaterally, the committee ordered him to visit every married member of the community to get them to sign a document promising that for a year they would buy kosher meat only. The indignity of going door to door to compel his community to buy kosher meat - in other words, having to go to every member to beg them to carry out a practice that for them, as Jews, should have been automatic - was too much for Rev Pulver and he refused. The committee fined him ten shillings and threatened to suspend him from his office. Against his will, he then prepared a document that read as follows:

We, the undersigned members of the Jewish community in Cape Town do hereby bind ourselves to take cosher (sic) meat for Twelve months commencing from the date hereby fromin order to enable the Vestry to enter into a contract for the regular supply thereof Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope.¹⁹

He took this to all the married members of the congregation. The result could have been predicted:

Signed: A de Pass, Phyllis Sloman, S Rudolf, RJ Joseph, B Jacobs, A Alexander

Remarks: Mrs Wolff will take cosher meat but will not bind herself without the consent of Mr Wolff who is absent from town

Mrs M Hart will take meat but will not sign any document

Mr J Mosenthal refused to sign

Mrs S Marcus will give no answer

Mr N Moss, no answer.²⁰

The President and secretary then complained that Rev Pulver had not gone to them to ask for their

signatures. He explained that he had not thought it necessary seeing that they were the ones who had given him the order.²¹ This pettiness, for him, was the last straw. The following week, some two years after his arrival in Cape Town, he handed in his resignation, in which letter he stated his complaints clearly:

My principal reasons for wanting to leave this congregation are first, that I cannot get kosher meat, secondly that I cannot as a Jewish parent bring up my children in a place where so little regard is paid to the principles of our Holy Religion; and thirdly, that, notwithstanding nearly two years' trial to live as economically as possible, I could not make my income meet my expenses.²²

The Congregation, in self-righteous indignation, and in the knowledge that they would have to face the wrath of the all-powerful British Chief Rabbi (to whom they suspected that Rev Pulver had already written) tried to defend itself. After Rev Pulver's departure, they sent the following letter to Chief Rabbi Adler:

18 June 1851

In consequence of no reply having been received from the Revd J Pulver in answer to a letter of the General Meeting dated 15th June 1851 in answer to his of the 12th Inst. respecting the three separate reasons given for his resignation, it was resolved that the following record be entered in the minutes.

To the first that "I cannot get kosher meat", The Vestry in reply state that Mr Bindemann of the Shambles No 2 was willing to allow the Shochet to kill at his shambles for 12 months conditionally that the community takes meat for said period - Mr Van Reenen of Shambles No 3 was willing to allow the Shochet to Slaughter the whole of his cattle if the same was done - at 5 'o clock in the morning instead of 11 'o clock as heretofore. To the Second Reason, that "I cannot bring up my Children in a place where [sic] so little regard is paid to the Holy Religion", The Vestry is desirous of recording the following facts - That they commenced operations [sic] are in order to support and establish in this Colony the Holy cause of the religion of their forefathers whom at no time did their number consist of more than 20 members the greater part of which were single men. Yet the following was the result of their labours.

They purchased a Burial Ground and erected a Stone wall around it at own expense of £400. They built a maltar [sic] house which cost £110 -, purchased the Synagogue which cost £800 - put on a new roof at an expense of £200, fitting up the Synagogue £150.0.0, Furniture £40 and Sundry Charities £100. The above expenditure of £1800 has been met by the few members before referred to, with no other papible [sic] reason but that of establishing the cause of their

Holy Religion.²³

They also justified the meagre stipend their minister had received by pointing out that in addition to his salary of £100, Rev Pulver had received as donations his tailor's bill of £15, his hatter's bill of £1/13s, a donation of three-month's rent from B Norden Esq. plus occasional stores. As a good-will gesture they agreed to donate £25 towards his travelling expenses and his supporters contributed as well. Rev Pulver agreed to continue with his duties until their departure some months later and conducted the first Jewish marriage in a South African synagogue, that between Isaac Saul Solomon, tailor and Frances Amelia Sloman.²⁴ It is of interest that Frances Amelia's mother was one of those prepared to bind herself to purchasing 'cosher' meat.

Rev Pulver also conducted the 1851 Rosh Hashanah services, but his resignation had caused such ill feeling that the small congregation held two separate services, one conducted in the synagogue without a minister and the other in another venue with one.

As for Rev Pulver, he moved to Melbourne with his family and became assistant minister to the Rev Moses Rintel. It was a good move. He was well accepted and when a new synagogue was planned two years later in Bourke Street, he was asked to serve on the Building Committee. By 1854, there were complaints in the community that the supply of kosher meat was not adequate - is it unreasonable to suspect the complaints emanated from the Rev Pulver? - and the committee decided to appoint a suitable person as *shochet*. The person appointed was Rev Pulver, from 16 October 1854 at a salary of £250 per annum. This was more than double his salary in Cape Town (where, moreover, far more had been expected of him, even if members of the congregation had paid for his hats and suits).²⁵

In 1853, Rev Rintel proposed to the Synagogue Board that they ask Chief Rabbi Dr Adler to set up a Bet Din consisting of himself and Rev Isaac Pulver. The proposal was turned down, but when Reverend Samuel Herman arrived in February 1864 the Chief Rabbi created an Australian Beth Din in Melbourne comprising Rev M Rintel, Rev Pulver and Rev Herman.²⁶

After five years as *shochet*, Rev Pulver resigned to become the second reader and secretary of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation's school. With three ministers, the kosher meat supply was ensured and he no longer needed to slaughter the meat himself. The following year, he served on a School Board to consider opening a Jewish day school and started services in St Kilda, a suburb in Melbourne where many new Jewish immigrants were settling. In 1871, he moved on to Tasmania to become minister of the Hobart Hebrew Congregation. He died there two years later, aged seventy.

Rev Pulver had left Cape Town for three reasons - he could not get kosher meat, he could not as a Jewish parent bring his children up in a place where so little regard was paid to the principles of Judaism

and he could not come out on his salary. In Melbourne, he was able to fulfil all his requirements. He was able to get kosher meat, his salary was considerably increased and his children were brought up with a thorough knowledge of Judaism. Indeed, his Australian-born son Louis in due course became the headmaster of the East Melbourne Hebrew School, serving there for seven years before moving to Sydney as headmaster of the Sydney Jewish Day School from 1885–1896.

Louis Pulver was described as “a heaven born instructor of youth”. When he died, the following poem in his memory appeared in the *Jewish Herald*:

... Mourn we today, A greater loss doth fill
Our hearts with grief. Gone is the presence
kind -
The teacher, rarely gifted to instil
The love of G-d in childhood's budding mind
Who from the mouth of babe and suckling strove
To stablish strength in Jacob's southern tents...²⁷

It is a pity that the fledgling community in Cape Town could not offer the facilities or the supportive environment to enable it to benefit from this learned man and his son.

The Chief Rabbi had predicted that a “dangerous crisis into the whole existence of the [Cape Town] congregation” would result from the departure of Rev Pulver, and he was right. For a period, it looked as though the hope of Tikvath Israel would disintegrate entirely. The Chief Rabbi waited another seven years before suggesting it was time for the congregation to find itself another minister, and in 1859 he sent out Rev Joel Rabinowitz. Either the community had learnt something or it was a better match, because Rev Rabinowitz was to serve the Tikvath Israel congregation for 23 years. In 1863, he also consecrated the first purpose-built synagogue in Cape Town (now the SA Jewish Museum), which was designed in an Egyptian style by an architect called Mr Hogg.

It is of interest that the first purpose-built synagogue in Australia, the York Street Synagogue in Sydney (consecrated 1844) was also described as “a very pleasing structure of the Egyptian Order”²⁸ and that the Australian synagogues built in the 1840s in Hobart, Launceston and Adelaide were likewise built in the distinctive Egyptian style of architecture.²⁹

The author wishes to thank Dr. Ute ben Yosef of the Jacob Gitlin Library and Larry and Michael Rubinstein from Australia for their invaluable help in accessing material for this article.

NOTES

- 1 Simon, J, “The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation: The Early Years, 1841-1937” in CABO, Vol 5 No 2 1991, 19
- 2 Tatz, Colin, Arnold, Peter & Heller, Gillian, *Worlds Apart: The Re-migration of South African Jews*, 2007, Rosenberg, NSW, Australia, 242 Small wonder that when Eastern European Jews arrived later that century they refused to

accept his authority selecting their own East European Rabbis

- 3 Herrman, Louis, *The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation 1841-1941, A Centenary History*, 13 -26
- 4 Abrahams, Israel, *The Birth of a Community: A History of Western Province Jewry from Earliest Times to the end of the South African War, 1902*, Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Cape Town 1955, 5
- 5 Herrman, 21
- 6 Herman, 49
- 7 Herman, 6
- 8 Herman, 26
- 9 Herman, 136
- 10 Rutland, Suzanne D, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, Collins Australia, 1988,, 26-30
- 11 I thank Prof. Howard Phillips, History Department, University of Cape Town, for making a copy of this available to me.
- 12 Herrman, L, *A History of the Jews in South Africa From The Earliest Times To 1895*, Johannesburg. Victor Gollancz, London, 1930, 128
- 13 Simon, John, “New Archival Material relating to the Early Development of South Africa's Jewish Community: Some preliminary observations”, In *Waters Out Of The Well: Essays in Jewish Studies*, Reuben Musiker & Joseph Sherman (Eds), University of Witwatersand, Johannesburg, 1988, 290
- 14 1850
- 15 The political agitation to which he was referring was the *Neptune Affair*, a boycott imposed to prevent the British from landing convicts in Cape Town as was done in Australia. Benjamin Nordern provided the unfortunate convicts with provisions at his own expense for a month. He was stoned by a mob and never recovered from his injuries. A police guard had to be stationed outside the synagogue.
- 16 The mitzvah of chaf-vav-lamed-yud-nun refers to “chulin” which means the kosher slaughter of animals for non-holy purposes (eg consumption) as opposed to “kodshim”: which refers to the kosher slaughter of animals for holy purposes (eg sacrifices). Rabbi D. Maizels, personal communication, 19.11.2007
- 17 Money had been collected in London for the synagogue. This was used to offset the price of Rev Pulver's ticket, Herrman, 32
- 18 Copybook of Nathan Adler (ARC 5, 3/1) in the Jewish Theological Seminary Archives in New York
- 19 From copy in the collection of the Jewish Board of Deputies from the old Jewish Museum, Cape Town.
- 20 Ibid
- 21 Herrman,, 1930,,171-174
- 22 Herrman, 1941., 26
- 23 From copy in the collection of the Jewish Board of Deputies from the old Jewish Museum, Cape Town.
- 24 Abrahams, 135
- 25 Solomon, Isidor, The Pulvers, in *Australian Jewish Historical Journal*, Vol 3, Part 1, 1949 pp 28-36
- 26 Rutland, 74. Solomon said the Melbourne Beth Din was established in 1866
- 27 Solomon, 36
- 28 Rutland, 29
- 29 Rutland, 32

SARAH GLUECK – LADY GREY'S DEFIANT POSTMISTRESS

*

Saul Issroff

Sarah Glueck acquired world-wide prominence during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. At the time, she was employed as the postmistress in the village of Lady Grey in the Cape Province, near the Lesotho border. She defied an invading Boer commando, inter alia by refusing to haul down the Union Jack. As a result, she was likened to the legendary Barbara Fritchie, the American patriot during the Civil War who defied the Confederate troops as they advanced through Frederick MD by waving the Stars and Stripes from a window of her home.

Sarah Bella Abrahams, the daughter of Elias Abrahams, was born in Zagare in Lithuania, circa 1867. She arrived in South Africa in the early 1890s with her husband, Marcus Glueck, who was born in Kletzkow, Germany, in 1867. They were married in the United States and had two children, Frieda Hannah (born 1889 in Charleston, South Carolina), and Percival Joseph (born circa 1891 in Birmingham, Alabama). She began her career in the Post Office as a postal assistant at Lady Grey, in the division of Aliwal North, in 1897, and by 1899 had been promoted to the position of its postmistress.¹

When Glueck died in Springs on 27 February 1933, the following obituary appeared in a Port Elizabeth newspaper:

Death of Mrs. Glueck: Bravery in Occupied Village

Mrs Glueck, who was honoured in South Africa and Britain as one of the outstanding heroines of the Anglo-Boer War, died aged 66. The story of her gallantry has figured in most of the authentic histories of the war. When hostilities began Mrs. Glueck was the postmistress of the little town of Lady Grey, in the Aliwal North district. The Boer forces invaded the colony and on several occasions took possession of and occupied Lady Grey.

On the first occasion they smashed the telegraph instruments. No sooner had they departed than Mrs. Glueck had them replaced, and when the Boers next drew near the town she quickly substituted the damaged set and hid the new instruments.

The Good Set Again

The invaders contented themselves with further damaging the instruments they found in the office. Upon their withdrawal the good set was immediately linked up to the nearest British force appraised of the situation. Whenever the Republican forces were in occupation they hoisted the Vierkleur, but their backs were hardly turned before Mrs. Glueck replaced it with the Union Jack as an indication that the town remained British. Similarly, when on one occasion President Kruger's proclamation was posted up, she stole out and pasted over it one issued by Lord Milner.

Ultimately the Boers entered into a prolonged occupation of Lady Grey. The residents had warning of their approach and the magistrate instructed all Government offices to quit. Mrs. Glueck duly obeyed the order, but she was among the last to leave, and she was burdened not with her household goods, but with every bit of property of value in the post office, including her precious instruments.

She removed herself to Herschel, where she installed herself as postmistress. When Major Hook reoccupied Lady Grey he sent for Mrs



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Glueck, and she cheerfully undertook to run both the Lady Grey and the Herschel post offices. It necessitated a daily horseback journey, which she made with unfailing regularity. During the occasions when the Boer forces were in occupation of Lady Grey, Mrs Glueck established an Intelligence department, which she conducted with the aid of native runners. She was thus able to keep the British fully informed of the position in the town and district and materially assisted in the military operations conducted by the British command.

Mentioned in Dispatches

Mrs Glueck was mentioned in dispatches, and a tribute to her heroism appeared in Major Hook's book on the campaign. The *London Times* hailed her as one of the heroines of the war and awarded her a substantial cheque, which was presented to her by Mr Ward Price, their correspondent in the field. Lord Milner also marked his appreciation of her bravery and devotion by promoting Mrs. Glueck to the postmistresship of Springs, a post she held for 20 years, till she was retired on a pension.

Glueck's wartime feats were further described by SA Rochlin in the 1 December 1950 issue of the *Zionist Record* ("Postmistress who was a 'Barbara Fritchie'"). Rochlin recorded that the O.F.S. Boers under Commandant Oliver came to Lady Grey after occupying the border town of Aliwal North in November, 1899. Here, they attempted to place President Steyn's proclamation on the notice board of the post office. Glueck not only took this down and substituted Lord Milner's pro-British statement, but also refused to hand over the keys of her office. This act of bravery won her great popularity among the British, with comments in the press including the following poem:

When you talk of deeds of glory
Of this campaign in the south,
Where the deeds seem super human
In the battle and the fray,
You'll remember one brave woman
In the town of Lady Grey.
It's the olden, golden story
Of the weak who can be strong;
It's the deed that rates the glory
Of the brightest wealth of song;
It's the old world - you can hear it,
Working with us here today;
It is Barbara Fritchie's spirit,
In the town of Lady Grey.

The obituary in the *Jewish Chronicle* of 24 March 1933 noted that Glueck had been a sister of the Polish-Jewish writer, Jacob Dinensohn and a well-known Zionist and communal worker. During the war, she had been "instrumental in preserving for the British forces a good set of telegraph instruments every time the Boer forces invaded the town. On the approach of the Boers she always installed a set of instruments which they had once damaged and replaced them by working instruments immediately they retired". She later served as Postmistress of Springs for some twenty years, in addition doing "valuable work for the Jewish community and the Zionist movement".

Sarah Glueck clarified her own part during the occupation of Lady Grey in a letter to the *Cape Times*, dated 23 March 1900:

Sir

A cutting from your paper- the paragraph relating to the Lady Grey incident was sent to me by a friend, which forces me to make some corrections. Firstly, the Boers had no flags when they entered Lady Grey and neither was hoisted. Secondly, which pains me much, is the tone in your article reflecting on our men. They did not fail in assistance. The Magistrate, Mr F. B Gedye, only gave up after receiving instructions to make no resistance, although his life was threatened. Here in Herschel, East London and Queens Town there are many refugees, who left their comfortable homes and thousands worth of stock, because they are too loyal to sign neutrality forms. Many of their homes have already undergone plunder and those who remained had to sign, not being able to obtain conveyance. Thus, they are forced to stay and suffer the indignity of being amongst rebels. I only acted as an official, but it was as much due to their loyalty that encouraged me.

NOTES

- 1 Women in Postal History <http://www.sahistory.org.za/franco/postal-history-women-colonial-po.html>
- 2 Jacob Dinensohn b. 1856 New Zagare (Lithuania) d. 1919 Warsaw. Popular Yiddish romantic novelist, friend of J. L. Peretz and Izak Meyer Dick. See *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* Vol. 3, 1941

IDENTITY, ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTISEMITISM

*

Mike Berger

This article has arisen from a previous blog on the resonances between modern anti-Zionism and the antisemitism explored in Philip Roth's 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*. But it is also personal, especially at the two ends, where I briefly explore my own reactions to the complex predicament facing Israel and its Diaspora. I make no apology for introducing the personal element since I have never pretended to the status of dispassionate expert. On the contrary, I identify completely with what I see as the core idea of Zionism – that Jews are entitled to a national identity and homeland in which they can embody their own history and evolving national personality in the same way as the other peoples of this increasingly globalised planet. This makes me the implacable opponent of those, Jewish or non-Jewish, who wish to destroy that possibility.

I make no demands that others share this vision, though I know that it is widely shared, only that they desist from actively working for its demise. My ethnic identity must also share emotional and intellectual space with my other commitment to a universal humanity, not to mention my South African persona. Such sharing is not always comfortable, since brothers may engage in murderous sibling rivalry, and my universalist leanings at times must take temporary second place to my Zionist affiliations. But there are no simple formulae for such coexistence so I, and others in the same predicament, accommodate the conflicting demands as best we can in each situation.

A fair amount of print space over the past few years has been devoted to examining the treatment of Israel in much of the Western media and, by extension, the role of prejudice (antisemitism and irrational anti-Zionism)¹ in the kind of coverage Israel receives. In essence, along with many other commentators, I have argued that the media coverage of Israel is seriously prejudiced and distorted and this continues in the face of rational argument and fact. The historical roots of antisemitism run deep, but it is clear that its

modern manifestation is the result both of deliberate propaganda as a component of a conscious paramilitary strategy, and as the expression of more random forces within the global – especially Western – left.

Such developments have forced Jews who regard themselves as progressive, espousing universalist and humanist values, to confront their own relationship with Israel. Most, like myself, see no deep contradiction between their support for Israel and their broader ideological commitments, and any disquiet experienced with specific aspects of Israeli policy and society does not require a reorientation of their priorities. In fact, many find that their moral and political values impel them to support Israel especially strongly in the international arena in view of the manifestly unjust barrage of criticism it attracts and the retrograde and even fascist practices of the regimes and political groupings which confront Israel both in the Middle East and elsewhere. However, a significant and vociferous section of Jewry has taken up covert or openly antagonistic positions vis-à-vis Israel.

In the following paragraphs, I look at some issues determining attitudes towards Israel and the implications these have for the majority of Jews, and many non-Jews, who support Israel. My position is predicated on the view that political choice is a multi-dimensional process determined by psychological processes, by ideological (political) orientations, by intellectual disposition and by situational and interactional factors.² These are all mutually interactive. Although such an analysis can slip easily into a rigidly determinist paradigm, I take the view that all individuals have freedom of choice and, along with Isaiah Berlin, that such freedom is extended by knowledge and self-reflection.³

It is widely recognised that identification with an ethnic or religious group or with an ideological belief or some other collective ideal, plays an important role in determining political attitudes and choice – “Political identity emerges from a dynamic interplay between the psychological make-up of individuals, their embeddedness in particular political and social structures and institutions, and the major political experiences of their lives, which together influence their political ideologies and roles.”⁴ I can think of no better way of conveying the essence of identity, than through some quotes from Roth's extraordinary novel: “Their being Jews issued from being themselves....It was... as fundamental as having arteries and veins...(They) needed no profession of faith or doctrinal creed...”⁵ Roth was referring to ordinary middle class Jews, mainly immigrants or

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the children of immigrants from the ghettos of Eastern Europe, living in predominantly Jewish suburbs in mid-twentieth century USA. These quotes capture the essence of deep identity in which the personal and the collective are indistinguishable and inseparable.

In Roth's fictionalised but eerily plausible account, the USA is stealthily led into pro-Nazi and insidiously antisemitic policies at the outbreak of World War II, from which it was rescued only by the mysterious disappearance of Lindbergh, its shadowy and iconic President. What makes his book especially relevant to our time and theme is how closely current Western anti-Zionism mirrors the dynamics of the antisemitism of the mid-Twentieth Century as depicted by Roth.

A leitmotif throughout the novel is the question: where do paranoia, fear and parochialism end and true antisemitism begin? Do the bland, seemingly innocuous and apparently reasonable criticisms of Jewish cultural difference, exclusivity and failure to assimilate more thoroughly into the predominantly white, Protestant host population disguise a deeper and more sinister threat, or are they to be taken at their face value, as some more 'enlightened' members of the Jewish community would have their compatriots believe? In essence, according to the 'enlightened' argument, the Jewish community should not be immune to rational criticism and serious self-reflection. To claim that such negative comment disguises antisemitic prejudice and evil intentions is precisely the reason why Jews are disliked by their host populations: by using self-serving victimhood as camouflage, so runs the accusation, Jews license themselves to remain an exclusive, self-seeking community free to manipulate the good intentions and tolerance of their non-Jewish neighbours for their own ends.

The resemblance of this line of argument to the debate around Israel is striking. Robert Fine characterises the currently fashionable Western discourse as follows:

...the accusation of antisemitism (by Israel's defenders) is now used to trash anyone who is critical of the policies of the Israeli government. ...[As a consequence] The struggle against antisemitism, once seen as central to the construction of a new Europe after the war, is increasingly disavowed since the charge of antisemitism merely serves to deflect or devalue criticism of Israeli occupation, Israeli human rights abuses, Israeli racism toward Arabs, and Israeli military force in Lebanon and Gaza.⁶

Fine goes on to demonstrate the hollowness of this argument and, while Roth's answer is more indirect, it is also unequivocal. The ordinary American Jew, reacting with horror, confusion and indignation to Lindbergh's plausibly rational and ambiguous pronouncements, is right on the money. They were largely accurate in their perception that the Jewish community was being singled out and stigmatised,

and correctly perceived such unfair criticism would encourage antisemitism in the general population.

Thus, according to Roth, the Jews were not the only ones who understood the coded messages behind the plausible words: antisemites within the American population took full advantage of the licence afforded by the new discourse to take out their prejudices on their fellow citizens. The DNA of racial stereotyping and exclusion from moral concern is universal and any individual (whether predator or prey) is alert to cues of ostracism and exclusion. It is important to note that Roth does not descend into a simplistic Manichean universe of innocent Jews surrounded by evil predatory foes. On the contrary, he invests his characters with the full gamut of human good and evil, regardless of their religious and ethnic affiliations.

Roth's fictional narrative is acutely relevant to the issue of Israel. Just like the flawed Jews of America, Israel is imperfect despite its enormous successes. Corruption, especially within its political domain, is too frequent for comfort. Racism is prevalent amongst some sections of the population. Social and economic inequality has increased and education policy and funding, on which the future of Israel rests, is far from optimal. Fundamentalist religion exerts an unhealthy influence on Israel's political and civil life and Israel needs to find ways of living more humanely and harmoniously with its unassimilated and often fractious minority populations. Above all, Israel hasn't been able to disengage from its role as an occupying power, however reluctant and indirect, over an alien hostile population with all the consequences on its own social and moral fabric.

None of this should occasion any surprise given the history of Israel and the region in which it is embedded and the multiple antagonistic agendas it has to deal with, both within and outside its borders. Some of these are solvable by Israel alone and others depend on the cooperation of others. None are easy and some may be utterly intractable, but they all provide a challenge to those who wish to make tangible contributions to the Zionist project.

Israel's imperfections and transgressions, however, cannot objectively explain the flood of obsessive and unbalanced criticism levelled at it. David Hirsh, in his speech to the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism in Jerusalem on 25 February 2008, puts it this way:

Jews are involved in a real conflict in the Middle East ... When Jews are involved in conflicts, there is a danger that the ways people think about those conflicts get mystified in the language of antisemitism. Anti-Zionism is not a reasonable response to the actual situation; it is a response to a narrative of the actual situation which has become mystified by antisemitism....Real human rights abuses are mystified as being genocidal like Nazism; institutional racism is mystified as being worse than apartheid; the occupation is mystified as being unique and as being a

manifestation of a Zionist essence; Jewish power is mystified as an 'Israel lobby' capable of perverting the policy of the only super power on the planet against its own interest....contemporary antisemitism is not explicitly or obviously antisemitic. ... Antisemitism of this sort is not explicit, is not obvious, and is not self-aware. It is necessary to analyze and interpret a text to know whether it is antisemitic.⁷

A vivid example is provided by a recent correspondence in the SA Jewish Report. Daniel Mackintosh⁸ claims that racism is prevalent amongst Israelis (specifically, in this context, Jewish Israelis) and contrasts this with the implied tolerance, except for a few extremists, displayed by Palestinians⁹. Yet Pew surveys show an extremely high level (97%) of anti-Jewish sentiment amongst Palestinians, a finding repeated in many other largely Muslim communities and one that comes as no surprise to anyone with knowledge of the political structure, culture and educational practices in many such communities.¹⁰ Of course, as Chris MacGreal points out,¹¹ surveys also show that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim feelings are significant amongst Israelis, at a 40-50% level (higher in some studies) within the population. Without nitpicking over methodology and precise percentages, it is clear that racism is high in both societies, but the ideological, anti-Zionist bias of the writer leads him to imply that racial prejudice is largely confined to Israelis.

Besides the objective inaccuracy of Mackintosh's claim, it ignores the fact that Israeli society as a whole is legally and informally committed to non-racism, further reinforced by the proliferation of vociferous human rights groups and judicial institutions committed to combating racist practices by individual Israelis or civil society.¹² Surprisingly, given the severity of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the provocations often faced by Israelis in their interactions with Palestinians,¹³ serious racist actions by Israelis are relatively infrequent and examples of productive coexistence common.¹⁴ It is legitimate to ask whether such restraint would be shown by many other Western societies if faced with a similar history and on-going predicament?

The problem encountered in analysis is that antisemitism can be used in two related but distinct ways. One refers to objectively irrational and selective criticism of - or behavior towards - Jews as a whole or a significant and core sector of Jewish society, Israel for example. The other usage refers to the emotion, conscious or unconscious, of hostility towards Jews or Israel/Israelis specifically. It is widely assumed that the former implies the latter, but need that be the case? Is it possible that a pervasively biased discourse (perhaps itself derived from conventionally antisemitic sources) further compounded by simple ignorance, other ideological loyalties, identification with the perceived underdog, herd instinct or more serious situational pressures, can produce an objectively biased (antisemitic) belief and action pattern while free of conventional

antisemitic prejudice? And is this important? Does it really matter, in practical terms, whether biased behavior is caused by faulty information processing and situational factors or by internal disposition?

In my view the short answer is that one cannot easily generalize about the sources of irrational anti-Zionism in individual cases and, secondly, it probably doesn't much matter. Given the multi-dimensional processes whereby political choices are made, the individual pathway can vary from one individual to another. In many cases the mechanism may be obvious: some are clearly motivated by old-fashioned antisemitism revealed by the virulent tone and abusive content. This can infect Jews and non-Jews alike and is marked by the significant presence of the following cues: fixity of belief and resistance to contrary evidence, obsessiveness, frequent expressions of hostility and excessively emotive language, choice of metaphors, stereotyping, a tendency to select, exaggerate and misrepresent and, of course, unambiguous statements of hatred and threats of destruction. All these gradations are apparent in considerable portions of the Western media and on the Internet and reflect old-fashioned antisemitism expressed as anti-Zionism.

In other cases the cause may include varying proportions of the other personal and social factors mentioned above. While of great interest to various academic disciplines, the individual motivations underlying irrational anti-Zionism is, arguably, of less importance than its prevalence (and hence potential for social spread) and its political and military impact. It must be remembered that the diplomatic and media campaigns are significantly driven by a deliberate strategy to use "public opinion" as an offensive weapon to undermine, psychologically, economically and diplomatically, the capacity of Israel to resist.¹⁵ The provocations of Hamas and its approach to its military action are components of this strategic agenda. A prime example on the diplomatic-public opinion front is the Goldstone Report¹⁶ which, on a host of objective criteria,¹⁷ is a plainly prejudicial and politicized document intended to stigmatise Israel.

It would be perverse to believe that the flood of anti-Zionist comment, irrespective of motivation, pervading much of the Western media does not result in secondary antisemitism of the conventional variety. It would imply a compartmentalization of rational thought and emotion for which no evidence exists and which is contradicted by the very content and volume of the critical comment, by the mass meetings and inflammatory slogans, by the spike in antisemitic acts in many Western countries and by the abusive and clearly antisemitic tone of large number of contributions to Internet threads. The reality is captured in the following quote: "It has often been asserted by left authors (for example, Noam Chomsky) that the link between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is a tenuous one. Chomsky asserts that the linkage is a device used by Zionists to squash dissent. Yet the linkage would not be possible—or at least would be much more difficult—if there was no

past or current demonstration of anti-Semitism among Israel's opponents. Simply stated, while it is absolutely true that all anti-Zionists are not Jew hating bigots, anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic in intent."¹⁸ And, I would add, as an outcome.

As shown in numerous studies, pervasive social prejudice is internalised by the exposed population and by the targets (specifically here, Jews and Israelis) themselves. The overt response to such an assault on self-image varies. Not surprisingly, it has driven many Jews into an ultra-nationalist stance in which Israel figures as a paragon of virtue in a sea of evil and hostility. Many others have been impelled into a more moderate, but equally obdurate, resistance to the programme of stigmatisation and delegitimisation. At the very least, few Jews for whom the Zionist project represents something positive and admirable, are eager to add their tuppence worth of criticism to the malevolent chorus and thus keep their counsel when otherwise they may have been willing to publicly chastise their brethren.

But for a significant minority the ideological assault on Israel has had a different effect. Simple observation attests to the fact that the individual may succumb to such stereotyping. In this case we expect, and see, a spectrum of graduated responses ranging from disengagement to the role of actively hostile internal critic. Underlying much of the critical comment directed at Israel from within idealistic segments of Jewry, especially the younger generation, is the intrusion of middle class guilt, historically naïve and unrealistic ideals and decontextualised analysis into the historically and politically fraught territory of the Middle East.

But personal psychology and temperament can also contribute. In Roth's novel the character of Rabbi Bengelsdorf, Lindbergh's tame Jewish apologist, is depicted in distinctly unflattering terms. Specifically, he and others like him have taken on board the antisemitic prejudices they encounter in popular society or in groups to which they wish to belong, and thus seek to distinguish themselves from the Jewish common man. Laura Miller, in a review of Roth's novel, put it this way: "Bengelsdorf is a marvelous creation, part object lesson in the perils of collaboration and part meticulous parody of self-important men everywhere...".¹⁹ In extreme cases, we encounter Jews who strenuously compete with the most bitter antisemites in their unrestrained expression of hostility towards Zionism and Israel.²⁰

What lessons can be drawn? Public antisemitism and anti-Zionism constitute an existential threat to Israel through their multi-dimensional impact on Jews and non-Jews alike. This is now widely recognised, as is the importance of countering other paramilitary challenges of various kinds. The response cannot be predicated simply on answering prejudice with counter prejudice. Israel cannot afford the same retrogressive politics and racist stereotyping practiced by many of its enemies. It must appeal to its own highest ideals and those of the democratic world, not solely as a public relations exercise or for some abstract ethical imperative, but also because its

democratic and open culture provides Israel and Jewry with the creative edge and strategic flexibility to counter their numerically superior enemies.

The challenge is to reconcile democratic freedoms with the immediacy of existential threats. Such tensions are unavoidable in a conflict-ridden world. It is through the resolution of these difficult dilemmas that democracies derive their competitive edge, and all of us will have our own idea on where lines should be drawn. As a broad principle such lines must not curtail criticism, especially uncomfortable criticism. But where this strays systematically into betrayal and incitement it constitutes a grey but important junction where democracies under threat need to erect barriers. More important is the constant ideological repair and maintenance of the Zionist project so that it retains its potential for renewal and sturdy growth. It is only in this way that Jewish youth will remain committed to Israel and to the idea of a Jewish people living as respected members of a globalised world. Our ability to adroitly navigate these stormy waters may be the key to the survival of Israel as a Jewish state for all its peoples.

Postscript

I have added a reference to an extremely important source of information on the paramilitary strategy of delegitimisation, demoralisation, diplomatic isolation, economic and academic boycott and lawfare being conducted by Israel's regional enemies backed by an international alliance of mainly radical left NGOs.²¹ It is a matter of existential importance that this be recognised and countered. There is no place for critics of Israel, especially Jews, who feed into this process while claiming innocence and simply a devotion to human rights. Jews whose surreptitious objective is to weaken and divide the Jewish Diaspora as a component of the paramilitary strategy must be named and outed. There is always place for genuine criticism in a context and in a manner which does not play into this strategy. The Reut Institute website should be consulted for further information.

NOTES

- 1 I use the words antisemitism and anti-Zionism in this article in different ways. Anti-Zionism is hostility towards Israel that goes beyond criticism of one or more specific acts, social features or policy decisions, but is a systematic and encompassing critique of the philosophy, the country and society. In some instances, this may arise from a variably rational view which sees the Zionist project as misguided or even partaking of colonial and imperialist characteristics. At some ill-defined point such anti-Zionism passes over into what I term, in places, "irrational anti-Zionism" in which Zionism is essentialised as an evil movement fascist in spirit and intent and comparable to other widely condemned movements like apartheid or Nazism. Antisemitism, as pointed out in this article may have, at least, two meanings. One is the conventional antisemitism expressed by significant sectors of Christian Europe and much of the Muslim world in which Jews as a people are depicted as inherently evil,

- treacherous, devious, cruel, cowardly, greedy and aesthetically repugnant. Clearly the intensity and virulence of such feelings vary. Antisemitism may also be applied to the excessive and selective criticism of Jews or prominent aspects of the Jewish world, e.g. Israel, which is relatively unaccompanied by pan-Jewish prejudice but derives from other sources, like ideology, conformity, ignorance and so forth. Much antisemitism, both conventional and unconventional, is expressed in the form of anti-Zionism, especially irrational anti-Zionism – but the two terms are not identical in meaning. Nevertheless, irrational anti-Zionism, irrespective of its origins, can be defined as objectively antisemitic even where its motivation does not arise from conventional antisemitic prejudice. Also see, for example, “England’s not so pleasant aspect” by Anthony Julius in the *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 Feb 2010 at <http://www.thejc.com/print/26775>.
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 - 3 Isaiah Berlin, *From hope and fear set free*. in *The Proper Study of Mankind: an anthology of essays*. Eds. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 2000.
 - 4 *Leaving the Radical Left: Anti-Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and Jewish Response* (Part Three, Draft 1). From the New Centrist Blog at <http://newcentrist.wordpress.com/2008/07/18/leaving-the-radical-left-anti-zionism-anti-semitism-and-jewish-response-part-three-draft-1/>
 - 5 Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America: A Novel*. Vintage International, 2005, p220.
 - 6 Re-membling the Holocaust. Robert Fine at <http://engageonline.wordpress.com/2010/02/01/robert-fines-talk-to-the-ucu-meeting-legacy-of-hope-anti-semitism-the-holocaust-and-resistance-yesterday-and-today/>
 - 7 <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/printarticle.php?id=1683>.
 - 8 *SA Jewish Report*, 22/1/2010: “I have met young Jewish people who are not proud of the racism that is so prevalent in Israel...”
 - 9 *SA Jewish Report*, 4/12/2009: “South African Jewish youth have started to meet Palestinians, and although there are those violent, anti-Semitic extremists, many.... have found that the majority of Palestinians want to live in coexistence with their Jewish neighbours under a just peace.”
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 - 13 Yaacov Lappin, ‘Hello Police? Screw your sister!’ *Jerusalem Post*, 12/2/2010. See <http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=168520>.
 - 14 Daniel Doron, ‘The surprise of it all’, *Jerusalem Post*, 10/2/2010. See <http://www.danieldoron.com/en/commentary/full/the-surprise-of-it-all/>.
 - 15 See launch of International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) at www.globalwomenstrike.net/AntiZionism/internationalJewishAnti-ZionistNetworkerCharter.htm; Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/html/final/eng/sib/aic2_04/aic_hp.htm; ‘Manipulating the marketplace of ideas’, Gerald M. Steinberg at *Haaretz*, 29 November 2009; Viewpoint by Gerald Steinberg, *Jerusalem Report*, 17 August 2009; NGO Monitor, 13 October 2008 at http://www.ngo-monitor.org/article/ngo_lawfare_new_monograph_from_ngo_monitor.
 - 16 Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict at <http://www2.ohchr.org/English/Bodies/Hrcouncil/Docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.Pdf>.
 - 17 Memorandum to the Human Rights Council re the Goldstone Report at <http://maurice-ostroff.tripod.com/id235.html>; Open letter to Goldstone by Trevor Norwitz, see <http://www.goldstonereport.org/open-letters-to-goldstone/428-open-letter-from-trevor-norwitz>; The Goldstone Illusion, Moshe Halbertal in *The New Republic* 6 November 2009.
 - 18 Leaving the Radical Left: Anti-Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and Jewish Response (Part Three, Draft 1). From the New Centrist Blog at <http://newcentrist.wordpress.com/2008/07/18/leaving-the-radical-left-anti-zionism-anti-semitism-and-jewish-response-part-three-draft-1/>
 - 19 Laura Miller, Review of Phillip Roth’s *The plot against America: a novel*, 8 October 2004 at http://www.powells.com/review/2004_10_08.html.
 - 20 Anthony Julius, ‘Jewish Anti-Zionism Unravelling (Part 1): The Morality of Vanity’ and ‘Jewish Anti-Zionism Unravelling (Part Two): Questioning Antisemitism’, in *Z-word* (blog), March 2008, at <http://www.z-word.com/z-word-essays/jewish-anti-zionism-unravelling> and <http://www.z-word.com/z-word-essays/jewish-anti-zionism-unravelling%253A-questioning-antisemitism-%2528part-2%2529.html>.
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THE ALEPPO CODEX

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Simon Berg

One of the most significant outcomes of Dead Sea Scrolls research over a period of approximately forty years was that many of the biblical scrolls that were found differed in content, length and wording from the Hebrew Bible - Tanach - which was finally established and redacted about two thousand years ago. Approximately two hundred and thirty scrolls, from almost one thousand in various stages of completion, were biblical. These represented copies of all of the books of the Tanach except the Book of Esther, and only a very small section of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. Furthermore, they also represented the variant scriptural, i.e. biblical, writings used by the many different Jewish groups or sects during the Second Temple era, up to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

The years 1946-1947 saw the beginning of an almost ten year period of discovery of these scrolls in a total of eleven caves in the Dead Sea region. These caves, incidentally, were part of the Kingdom of Jordan. They were considered to be hiding and storage places to protect Jewish works and scripture from impending destruction by the occupying Roman forces.

Qumran, set on a plateau-like region overlooking the Dead Sea, is the site of the ruins believed to have been the domain of the Essenes. Within the 'standard theory', these probably composed or copied some of these scrolls. Many of the Essenes were regarded as former Sadducees of the priestly class who broke away from what they regarded as a defilement of Temple ritual. The latter was thereafter performed by the predominantly Sadducean and Hasmonaean priesthood that remained.

Eight hundred years later there emerged in Babylonia, under the leadership of Anan Ben-David, a (probable) off-shoot of these Sadducean/Essenes, practicing their interpretation of Judaism which was devoid of the 'Oral Law'. This Jewish sect furthered their belief and practice, becoming known as Karaite Jews. The Karaites originated in Mesopotamia from various Jewish groups in the region of Iraq, and became formally established in the 9th Century. They have survived to this day, and although not

accepted by rabbinic Judaism, have their own synagogues and communities both in Israel and in parts of the Diaspora.

It is with this introduction that the reader will appreciate the significance and importance of the subject of the Aleppo Codex discussed in this article.

In 1890, in a synagogue in Fostat (or Fustat), a suburb in Cairo, the Talmudic scholar Solomon Schechter of Cambridge University came across a voluminous quantity of writings and documents dating back 1000 years. The discovery was made in a synagogue storage room for old religious books - known as a genizah. The synagogue was at first considered to be an exclusively Karaite synagogue, this being further reinforced by the discovery there of two related documents dating back to the Tenth and Twelfth Centuries. Fifty years later, these documents (which were named 'Tzadokite Fragments') were found to be very closely related to copies of an important and famous Essene (Dead Sea Scroll) scroll known as the 'Damascus Document,' dating from the first century BCE.

The Fostat synagogue (which can still be visited) was in fact a traditional Jewish synagogue that was shared by the Karaite Jews. The latter also married into the Jewish community, were buried in the Jewish cemetery and, importantly, used the facilities of its now famous genizah.

What later became particularly attributed to the Karaites (from the Hebrew word *karah* "to read") was their ability to establish formal Hebrew grammar (at which they were masters), and subsequently the final and absolute Masoretic text, together with the spelling, pronunciation and structure of the Hebrew Bible around 850 CE. Today, we also use the term masoretic to imply that a biblical text being read, or in print, is the "original, divinely inspired, received, traditional, directly transmitted" text. The term Masoretic, per se, is also in itself controversial, and has been open to interpretation in recent decades by biblical scholars. I would like to cover this topic in a future edition of this journal.

The Karaites scholars, who became involved in the development and preservation of the correct biblical text and all it encompassed, were known as 'Masoretes'. Others sages, also referred to as Masoretes, originated from a suburb in Tiberias, Israel, and were known as Tiberian Masoretes. They lived in the first half of the Tenth Century, and competed with one another over their interpretations. There were also Masoretes outside of Eretz Israel, in Babylonia. Thus, differences between the East and Eretz Israel also existed.

Simon Berg, a regional sales manager for a multi-national pharmaceutical company, has written and lectured extensively on the Dead Sea Scrolls. His recent book Insights into the Dead Sea Scrolls – A Beginner's Guide (2009) provides a concise, scholarly skillfully communicated overview of the subject. Copies can be obtained from the author at siroberg@icon.co.za.

My focus is on this particular sect of Jews, the Karaites: the greatest work having proliferated from them, and which was referred to and recognized by the Rambam (Maimonides) himself. This work, or rather Tanach, is famously known as the Aleppo Codex.

From about the Seventh Century, the need arose for the recognition of a universally acceptable and accurate biblical text in its written format. From amongst these scribes and scholars, the Masorete group developed. Their prime purpose was to guard and preserve the text of the Hebrew Bible, ensuring that it would be correctly transmitted throughout the ensuing generations. Their works were also known for the scholarly notations made in the margins of a text.

The concept of preserving the original biblical text originated during and after the Babylonian exile. This Masoretic Text was required to be accurate in every way, encompassing the spelling and layout in the Torah, Prophets and Writings, and had to be rigidly adhered to. During the Seventh, and up to the Eleventh Centuries, Masorites working in both Tiberias and Jerusalem, compiled systems of pronunciation and grammatical rules that would also ensure the correct interpretation. Furthermore, the verse divisions and structure of the columns became more fixed. Yet the text of the Torah still lacked absolute finality in the way that words were to be pronounced and hence impact on their exact meaning.

It was particularly in this area that the Masoretes excelled. They developed the system of vowel markings (nekudot) to bring absolute clarity to the pronunciation and meaning of certain words. The recognized 'giant' contributor to the final establishment of our Masoretic Tanach was the 'swift scribe,' Shlomo Ben Buya'a, who wrote the most accurate version of the Tanach, circa 920. This was in the form of a codex; composed of pages that were written on both sides, as opposed to lengthy scrolls that were wound around two end staves of wood. According to halachah (Jewish religious law), a Bible in codex form is not acceptable for public reading in the synagogue. For that purpose, (Torah) scrolls are used. The first completed and printed Hebrew Bible book appeared in 1488 in the town of Soncino, Italy.

The next step in the finalization of this particular Tanach was the inspection and validation of the text, and subsequent addition of a system of vowels developed and provided by the Masorete, Aaron Ben Asher, a famous grammarian and scribe of the 10th century. The Dead Sea Scrolls used the Hebrew letters, yud, hey and vav also as vowels. Ben Asher developed the system of cantillation or the musical 'trop', which further accentuated the importance of certain words in the Torah or Nach when sung.

It is widely accepted that this very book was used by the Rambam himself, and was accredited with the most venerable title of 'Ha Keter Hagadol,' or 'The Great Crown,' because of its unique authority. At first, the Codex remained the property of Ben Asher himself. His name, written in his own hand, does not

appear on the first pages, nor does that of the scribe Ben Boya'a.

Only after one hundred years, when it was sold by the descendants of the sage Aharon Ben Asher of Tiberias to Yisrael Ben Simcha of Basra, Iraq, did the latter write in a dedication, thus naming the scribe and Ben Asher as being responsible for the work. Ben Simcha recorded in the last page of the Codex, that he dedicated the Aleppo Codex to the Karaite community of Jerusalem.

Today, all Torah scrolls are written in accordance with the standard set by the Aleppo Codex, including precisely how the words, sentences and spacing are aligned. The balance of the Hebrew bible was also part of, and included in, this most authoritative text in Judaism. There were periods when it was permitted to make manuscript copies by other scribes, and at other times, access was denied. The Karaites allowed access to both Karaite and Rabbinic scholars (including the Rambam) to this codex.

In the mid-Eleventh Century, the Keter arrived in Jerusalem, where it was used as an authorized source by both Karaites and rabbinical Jews. In 1099, the Codex was seized by the Crusader conquerors of Jerusalem and ransomed to the Jews of Cairo. Thus it came to be kept in the Cairo synagogue of Fustat, where it remained for some three hundred years. It was during this period that the Rambam had access to it when he wrote his great work, Hilchot Sefer Torah, also known as the Mishnah Torah. It was directly due to the Rambam's usage of that codex that its authority became established. The Rambam ruled that the divisions of a Torah scroll should follow the example of the Aleppo Codex, and that scribes who copied the scrolls of the Prophets should also follow the same divisions as laid out in it.

In 1375, the Codex was transported by a direct descendent of the Rambam, Rabbi David Ben Yehoshua, who traveled through Palestine to Aram Tzovah (Tzovah was the district, and Aram the name for Syria in Tanach) and placed it in trust with the ancient Jewish community of that city. News of the whereabouts of the Codex became known in the second half of the 15th Century, when it was established that it was permanently stored in the (Great) Aleppo Synagogue; which at that time was known for being one of the Jewish world's most important centers. It was then that this codex became referred to as the 'Aleppo Codex' or 'Keter Aram Tzovah' (Crown of Aram Tzovah). Today in Arabic, it is called Haleb, from the word for 'milk,' as it was here that Abram (Abraham) gave milk from his sheep to the poor in the area.

The rabbis of Aram Tzovah also referred to it as "The Keter of Ezra HaSofer" (Ezra the Scribe), as it was their belief that it was sequentially linked by validated copies to a Torah written by the prophet Ezra himself. It was first placed in the ark of the synagogue, and later transported to a cabinet room known as the Cave of Eliyahu (Elijah) HaNavi. There it was stored in the Aleppo Synagogue's vault for over 500 years. This synagogue is believed to have first been constructed by King David's General

after his conquest of the city in 950 BCE (see Samuel 2, 8:3-8).

Two days after the State of Israel was officially declared by the UN on 29 November 1947, riots broke out in Syria, and the Great Synagogue was destroyed. Through a series of unknown and 'mystical' occurrences, the community was able to save most of the Keter, which was found loose on a pile of ashes and debris, with many pages missing. Ultimately rescued were about two thirds of the pages of the Aleppo Codex, together with some other loose pages and page fragments. All were taken to the Shamash (beadle) of the synagogue, and passed on to the Chief Rabbi at the time. Over the next ten years, it was hidden in various locations. Because of the danger, the details of its survival were originally kept secret, and the world was allowed to believe that it had been destroyed in the fire.

There had been previous attempts to save the Codex (in its entirety), in 1943. This was through the efforts of Judah Magnes, the first president of the Hebrew University, who sent a representative on a mission to persuade the elders of the community to send it to Jerusalem for safekeeping. This was turned down; the elders considered that the Codex's holiness protected the well-being of the community. A second attempt took place later that year by biblical scholar Professor Moshe Cassuto, also sent from Jerusalem, who spent some time in Aleppo and was allowed to study the Codex. He was the last scholar to see the Codex in its entirety.

When in time this secret became known to the Israeli Government, a letter was issued requesting the delivery of the manuscript into Israeli hands. Finally, the community did give up the known remaining two-thirds, which were smuggled to Israel. The remains of the Codex left with thirty Syrian Jewish refugees, who went via Turkey and sailed from there on 11 December 1957 to Haifa. On its arrival, it was presented to the President of Israel, Ben Tzvi. Out of 490 pages, 294 remain and no satisfactory account has been given for the missing one third. Some fragments are still in the hands of Jews formally from Aleppo and their descendents, most of whom have formed large communities particularly in Israel and America. A few of the original pages of the Aleppo Codex are currently on display at the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book, Jerusalem, together with the main display of a selection of Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Aleppo Codex is the outcome of two momentous influences – the one internal and the other external – on the development of Hebrew manuscripts; the first is primarily the transformation from scrolls to codices; the second is the process which reached its peak with the final codification of the Masoretic text. It has been described as the most revered copy of the Hebrew Bible, and today, all Torah scrolls in Jewish communities everywhere in the world are written in accordance with the standard it set.

A page by page display of the remaining Aleppo Codex, together with enlargement options, can be seen on line at: aleppocodex.org.

NOTES

- 1 'Medieval Karaism' by Meira Polliak, in *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, p304.
- 2 Lawrence Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Jewish Publication Society, Doubleday, 1994, p90.
- 3 Mordechai Glatzer, *The Book of Books – From Scroll to Codex and into Print* (in Jerusalem Crown Companion Volume). Jewish Publication Society, 2002, pp 61-72.
- 4 David Sutton, *Aleppo – City of Scholars*, Arts Scroll Sephardic Heritage Series, p35.
- 5 Ibid., p34
- 6 Ibid., p36
- 7 Ibid., p37
- 8 Amnon Shamosh, 'The Aleppo Codex' in Israel Museum catalogue, *Treasures of the Aleppo Community*, p23.
- 9 Ibid., p21
- 10 'The Shattered Crown. The Aleppo Codex' in *Biblical Archeology Review* Sept/Oct, 2008.

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FREE TO CHOOSE

*

Charlotte Cohen

Each Jewish festival seems to give expression to a particular aspect of human experience.

As Rosh Hashanah deals with renewal and rebirth, and Yom Kippur with remorse and remission, so the underlying message of Passover is one of deliverance and redemption.

Passover reminds us each year of its underlying message of liberation.

Because there were several Jewish members in the Toastmasters club to which I belonged, it was decided that although the next meeting did not actually fall within the week of Passover, as it coincided with the celebration of Easter, we would organise a combined Easter and Passover theme. The Christian members of the club would bring Easter eggs and speak about the meaning and customs of Easter, whereas the Jewish members would bring matzos and Passover delicacies and discuss the significance of the rituals and practices associated with that festival.

Taking into account its fundamental message of emancipation, my assignment was to speak on 'Freedom.' There was only one problem: I could think of nothing to say about 'freedom'. For days I tried to imagine an illustrative story; or how to explain the concept of freedom in an inspirational way or how to present this abstract noun as identifiable

But nothing came to mind.

With only three days before the meeting, I decided to look up the word in a dictionary in the hope that this would provide a spark to alleviate my impasse. As well as several synonyms, the dictionary also described 'freedom' in antonyms: It was *not* being in bondage; it was not being in captivity; it was *not* being enslaved. It evoked no interpretive response.

I decided to check the thesaurus: Under the heading 'Freedom' I found this quotation by Franz Kafka: "It is often safer to be in chains than it is to be free." It made no applicable sense of relevance

How does one define 'freedom'? What state of existence must one be to be free? It may mean something entirely different to each individual person. Is a mother free when she has three children to look after, has to work to assist with the household finances, and has an elderly parent to care for as well? Is a man free to resign from a job in which he is unhappy, when he is committed to the hilt with home and business commitments, and a family dependant on the income it provides? Is one free when one is beset

by ill-health or physically dependant by being confined to a wheelchair or worse? Does freedom mean doing or saying whatever one wants - ignoring protocol or convention?

Finally, I decided to go to the root of it all: As the reason for speaking about 'freedom' in the first place was its association with Passover and the emancipation of the Jews, I began to wonder how Moses and the children of Israel must have felt when they finally reached the promised land - after forty years wandering in the desert? ... I wondered whether the Bible gave any insight into their emotions at that time and whether one could reach into that experience.

I fetched a Bible from the bookshelf. I paged through it to find the part where Moses finally reaches the Promised Land. In doing so, the journey on which I had embarked in a quest to find something meaningful to say about freedom, would bring two discoveries: The first - simply a fact that I did not know - and which, it appears, very few people are aware of either...

The second, although simple, was in my terms, more of a revelation! Besides providing me with the topic for my speech, it provided me with a concept which had a profound effect on my thinking ever since.

I found what I was looking for in Deuteronomy. As we know, Moses does not enter the Promised Land - but looks across at it. And then, Chapter 5 verse 6 reads: "*I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage*", followed by "*Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me; Thou shalt not make thee any graven image*", thereafter continuing to recount the rest of The Ten Commandments.

What struck me as odd was God's reference to the 'house of bondage' and that after the 4th Commandment (*-- but the seventh day is the Sabbath; in it thou shalt not do any work*) one finds the interjection: "*And remember thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee thence through a mighty hand and a stretched out arm.*" What bearing did these reminders about being a slave in the land of Egypt and now being free, have to do with The Ten Commandments? Why was it interrupted like this?

My son refuted the notion that there was any interjection made during The Ten Commandments. We took out the Bible again. He opened it at Exodus - where Moses receives the Commandments from God. There were no reminders or interpolations in it! I insisted that I had seen it. He said I must have been hallucinating.

And then, of course, the penny dropped: We had

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read 'The Ten Commandments' in two different places! He had seen them in Exodus. By focusing on when Moses reached the Promised Land, I had looked in Deuteronomy - which is where the commandments were *repeated* by Moses and the interjection, of course, made by him....

But still, why would he make it? What did the liberation of Jews from being slaves in Egypt have to do with The Ten Commandments anyway? The close connection between 'freedom' and The Ten Commandments could be no coincidence. How were they bound?

And then suddenly, the implication of it, hit me: What a contradiction! What a paradox!

Here were the Israelites finally to enter the land of freedom, and with them, they carry ten of the most prescriptive laws ever given to mankind!! In fact, 'freedom' was implicitly secured with laws that unequivocally forbade certain things, and which vividly and decisively drew boundaries.

Now I began to understand what Kafka meant ... *"It is often safer to be in chains than it is to be free."* A lamb put out in the wilderness is not free at all. It is doomed. Yet, within the confines of a pen, it is safe. There it is able to eat and play without risk. The lamb is 'free' because it is protected.

Therefore, freedom is not freedom, unless it has parameters, and when we are protected by the confines of just and prescribed laws.

If we refer again to the Ten Commandments, we find that the first four deal with man's relationship to God, whereas the last 6, with man's relationship to other men. There is no Commandment which puts a limit on our thinking (perhaps with the exception of

the personal responsibility which comes with "*thou shalt not covet*").

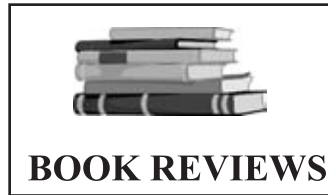
Therefore, the only unconditional freedom we have as human beings is freedom of thought. Here we are free to question, to contemplate, to consider, to imagine, to plan, to calculate and to choose. Our power to choose (described as a power even greater than the Angels as they can only choose to do good) is the greatest power bestowed on any living creature!

Although one may be free inasmuch as one is not at someone else's beck-and-call, real freedom is dependant on the restraints of conscience and integrity. These are our controls. These are our limits. Provided the laws are just, there can be no freedom without parameters.

If then, the truest meaning of freedom is the application of our Divine power of choice within the confines of a moral and ethical code of behavior, then the message of freedom which we learn at Passover, extends itself to every decision we make every single day of our lives. For it is then - where we have the freedom to contemplate and consider; to reposition ourselves; to rethink and reaffirm our values - that we genuinely exercise freedom in this miraculous power of choice that we have been given.

Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein spoke recently on the necessity for bringing principle and honor back into our thinking; and particularly in South Africa, despite our individual faiths, to have a common code of morality. He emphasized that as a nation, we can be 'individual yet united' by the simplicity of implementing what is 'good or bad'; starting with ourselves, and acting from the standpoint of what is clearly right or wrong.





RADICAL ENGAGEMENTS

*

David Saks

The young Lorna Borkum, only child of a middle class, liberal-leaning Johannesburg Jewish couple, grew up with a keen sense of the injustices that were being inflicted on black South Africans. As a university student in the late 1950s and afterwards, she gravitated naturally into left-wing anti-apartheid activities. While never arrested or banned, her close association with other, more high profile activists – most obviously her husband, the trade unionist and Treason Trialist Leon Levy – resulted in her having to leave the land of her birth for a prolonged period of exile in the UK. Towards the end of this period, she resumed her anti-apartheid activities, and had the satisfaction of taking part in the dramatic final years of “The Struggle” culminating in the transition to non-racial democracy. A few years later, she and her husband returned permanently to South Africa, settling in Cape Town.

This, in summary, is the story Lorna Levy recounts in her autobiography, *Radical Engagements*. Its themes have much in common with other autobiographical accounts by South African political exiles (of whom so high a proportion were Jewish), but is by no means typical. Levy was certainly involved with some of the main personalities and activities of early 1960s resistance, but remained to an extent an outsider. Here, her resistance to accepting the rigid Marxist orthodoxies of her colleagues undoubtedly played a major role.

One early experience that left a deep impression on Levy was how a classmate, Rhona Kiel, boldly challenged their Afrikaans teacher’s depiction of the Soviet Union as a place of misery and oppression. She countered that her mother had visited the Soviet Union and seen something very different.

Levy subsequently found out that Rhona’s mother was a named Communist. Later, she would have learned that her *verkrampte* teacher was essentially right and her boldly-spoken classmate wrong. Western leftists could be notoriously in denial about the realities of post-revolution Russia (or China or

Cuba), and the Soviet system was able to make such good use of such ‘useful idiots’ to bolster its international image.

Levy herself would not disagree with this. Her commitment to fighting apartheid, which did not balk at support for the armed struggle once methods of peaceful protest had proved futile, did not mean that she bought unquestioningly into the Utopian Communist vision of so many of her fellow activists. Once in exile, she had first-hand experience of the true nature of life behind the Iron Curtain whilst working or attending conferences in Moscow and Prague, and this confirmed her growing skepticism about Communism’s supposed Brave New World. The environment she describes is every bit as drab, repressive, paranoid and stifling as the Soviet system was generally depicted in the Free World.

For all that, Levy never became explicitly anti-Communist; to have done so, as she freely acknowledges, would have meant being sidelined by her fellow activists and, at best, relegated to the fringes of the anti-apartheid struggle. As it was, as she herself, acknowledges, her role within “The Struggle” was a fairly marginal one, although terming herself a mere ‘fellow traveler’ seems to overstate the case (her activities, for example, had included safeguarding and passing on potentially incriminating documents, a decidedly risky venture in the increasingly totalitarian environment of early 1960s South Africa).

Levy’s visit to Moscow in 1963 to participate in a Women’s Peace Conference proved to be a turning point in her life. Apart from being alienated by the blatantly propagandist nature of the event, she was hurt and deeply offended by being excluded from the ANC delegation, apparently because she was white. As a consequence, she took little part in anti-apartheid activities for the next two decades. In any case, the imperatives of forging a new life in a new country would have necessitated a degree of withdrawal. Her husband, who joined her in London immediately following her return from Moscow, was involved for a short period in anti-apartheid work, but eventually he, too, moved away from this, forging a successful new career within the British trade union environment.

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Levy herself eventually found her niche for a time in local politics. She was twice elected as a Labour Party councilor, first in London and thereafter in Birmingham after the family relocated there. The work was invigorating, although the frequently vicious infighting and, as she learned to her dismay, clear evidence of persistent racism within the party, generated a fair amount of disillusionment. Shortly after losing her seat to the Tory candidate, a loss that she was by then able to take in her stride, she returned to London. Returning briefly to South Africa to be with her father in his final illness then rekindled her commitment to her birthplace. Thereafter, she embarked with mounting enthusiasm on a new career of anti-apartheid activism, working closely with the ANC and forging anew many important friendships. Characteristically, though, Levy does not romanticize this period, candidly recording the infighting, jealousies and suspicion that were the negative flip-side of activist politics in exile.

Following the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, Levy became part of the ANC mission in London to prepare the way for the first democratic elections. The following year, she was selected by the ANC for diplomatic training in the Netherlands in preparation for the now imminent transition to non-racial democracy. This later saw her spending four months 'on attachment' at the Foreign Ministry in Oslo. Her high hopes of one day promoting the new South Africa in a political role were destined to be cruelly disappointed, however. Diplomatic posts in post-apartheid South Africa were hotly contested, and when the appointments were made in 1995 she was passed over.

A consistent strand throughout *Radical Engagements* is how the author wrestles with the question of identity, hers and, by implication, that of all political exiles. Was she a South African who happened to be living in the UK, or was she a

Britisher of South African origin? Most of her activist colleagues, she found, took the former view. She, on the other hand, strove to put the past behind her and become as British as she could. It came as an unpleasant shock when, some years after her return to South Africa following 34 years of being resident in the UK, she asked a gentile friend whether she thought of her as being South African or British, and was told instead that she identified her as Jewish. Levy, while also regarding being Jewish as one of her identities, had never described herself as Jewish first.

In the mid-1990s, the Levys returned permanently to South Africa, settling in Cape Town. So different was this environment from the one in which she had grown up, however, that the experience has been one of once again having to forge an identity in an essentially new society. In this case, it least, there has been comfort to be drawn from living in a country that had triumphed over its racist, divisive past and successfully forged a vibrant new democracy.

Radical Engagements is a welcome addition to the growing body of autobiographical literature by anti-apartheid veterans. Particularly engrossing is the section dealing with the tension-filled early 1960s period that culminated in the ruthless crushing of the resistance movements through the banning, detention, imprisonment and exiling of their leadership. Also of considerable interest are the finely observed descriptions of life behind the Iron Curtain, where the author's abhorrence of apartheid never blinded her to the manifold shortcomings of those regimes which the South African liberation movements came to revere so uncritically.

Radical Engagements: A Life in Exile by Lorna Levy, Jacana Media, 2009, 213pp EAN: 9781770097094,

LEO ZEITLIN: CHAMBER MUSIC

*

Estelle Sher

Leo Zeitlin – Chamber Music is an informative, fascinating and superbly detailed study of Leo Zeitlin (1884-1930), a superbly talented composer, arranger, violinist, violist, conductor, impresario and teacher. It not only gives us the story of Zeitlin and his music, but also includes all his known scores of Chamber

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works - about thirty - some published here for the first time.

Leo Zeitlin, as he called himself in the United States, was born Lev Mordukhovich Tseitlin in Pinsk, now Belarus, on 7 December 1884. At thirteen, he went to study at the Odessa Branch of the Imperial Russian Music Society. When he graduated, at the age of nineteen, he auditioned and was accepted at the St Petersburg Conservatory. A compelling reason for this further study was a diploma which would earn him the title "free artist", enabling him to be an

“honoured citizen”, exempting him from the draft and allowing him to travel freely. It would also allow him – a Jew – to live outside the Pale of Settlement to which Jews were confined. He studied violin with Nikolai Galkin, composition with Rimsky-Korsakov (that master of orchestration and teacher of so many), and instrumentation with Glazunov.

At this time, Zeitlin joined the Society for Jewish Folk Music (‘folk’ being understood as ‘ethnic’). This society was the catalyst for a brief but golden age of art music on Jewish themes drawn from cantillation, liturgical tunes and folksongs. Its major legacy is the body of published works by its member composers; between 1909 and 1918 it published at least eighty original compositions and arrangements, four of them by Zeitlin. In Moscow, the society lasted from 1912 to 1931, and gave concert tours and lectures, attracting wide audiences that included non-Jews. Art music on Jewish themes was a logical extension of the late 19th Century and nationalist musical style championed by the group of composers known as “The Five”, of which Rimsky-Korsakov was a leading member.

After graduating from St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1917, Zeitlin led a successful concert career in Ekaterinoslav as a conductor and composer, where at least six of his performances were composed and performed. He and his wife, Esther Rivka, later went to Vilna, where he conducted and performed. The United States beckoned and the Zeitlins arrived in New York in August 1923.

In New York, Zeitlin was hired as a violist by the Capitol Theatre, a “picture palace” that seated more than five thousand. Soon, he was arranging popular and light classical works for the small ensembles that played for the theatre’s regular Sunday evening radio program. Some of his own works were performed too. By 1929, he was writing for the Capitol Grand Orchestra. One of his works, a dramatic overture on Jewish themes titled ‘Palestina’, played a week prior to the High Holidays in September 1929. It was later broadcast on radio to an estimated six million people – a far cry from the Society for Jewish Folk Music! Zeitlin was highly regarded here among colleagues of the highest calibre.

In June 1930, at the age of 45, Leo Zeitlin suddenly developed *encephalitis lethargica* (sleeping sickness), and died soon after, leaving his wife Esther, a six year old son Nathan and a year old daughter, Ruth, in straitened circumstances. On his tombstone is engraved the first two measures of the cello part of his *Chef d’oeuvre Eli-Zion* (no. 5).

Esther went to live in Los Angeles, where Zeitlin’s music brought together an extraordinary array of prominent Hollywood figures for three benefit

concerts. She also took with her a trunk of original manuscripts, which were only discovered decades after her death in 1956.

Most of Zeitlin’s chamber works utilise strings. Despite his own work as an orchestral conductor and arranger, he hardly ever used other instruments and his interest in the voice is, of course, predominant. A few pieces that use piano only are the three Declamations (nos. 12–14). The arrangements are consistently skilful, imaginative and well-crafted. Although circumstances dictated that most of his works were arrangements, it is a pity that there are so few original compositions.

Zeitlin succeeded in capturing the Jewish idiom without using “real folk melodies”, notably in *Reb Nakhmon’s Tune* (nos. 3a and 3b) and others such as the instrumental quintets (no. 17). There is a strong dramatic element in his works, and melodically and harmonically there are the influences of late 19th Century Russian music, such as modal bits. His string writing with the contrapuntal chamber and interesting inner parts are evidence of his own playing of these parts.

From the extensive section on analytical discussions of the works in the book, that of No. 1 *More (The Sea)* is particularly interesting, with the rocking waves in the piano part combined with the speaking voice. And then there is his masterpiece, No. 5 *Eli Zion*, for cello and piano (the work that first attracted Paula Eisenstein Baker to Zeitlin’s music in 1986). There is *Lament O Zion: Fantasy* on a folk melody and the cantillation for *Song of Songs* from 1911 is described as a work with a “depth of mystical mood ... the best piece in Jewish musical literature until Bloch”. High praise indeed!

Then there is *A Yidl with his fiddle*, no. 4, and *Bim-Bom*, one of the six choral sketches for voices alone (19 – 24). *Reb Leyvi-Yitskhok’s Kaddish* (11a and 11b) is one of the best opportunities to examine how Zeitlin could take an existing source and turn it into an amazing work of art.

This is a treasure trove of Yiddish folk songs (all translated into English and sometimes Russian or Hebrew) for the enthusiast. It is an enlightening book to dip into, not only for Zeitlin’s music, but also for insights into the life and music of the times. There is much for the musician’s information and, of course, all the music. What a pity this superb volume does not include a CD! It also leaves one curious with regard to Leo Zeitlin’s other orchestral works.

Leo Zeitlin – Chamber Music, edited by Paula Eisenstein Baker and Robert S. Nelson, Middleton, Wisconsin, 2009.

READERS' LETTERS

*

In addition to the other interesting contributions in your Chanukah 2009 issue, I would like to express my appreciation for three in particular, namely: a) Jabotinsky by John Simon; b) Some Gentile Zionists by Cecil Bloom; and c) How the Jewish People can win a war that may never end, reviewed by Gary Selikow.

As the founder and Co-Chairperson of the Support Association for Zionism (SAZ) – a unique advocacy framework within which both Jewish and Christian Zionists promote the interests of Israel as a Jewish State according to Biblical prophecy – it was gratifying to note the heart-warming support the Jewish people have had from Gentile sympathizers in modern history, described by Cecil Bloom as “men and women with sincere attachments to the Jewish struggle for a National Home in Eretz Israel.”

He highlighted especially the activities of those high ranking British protagonists in the struggle to redeem the ancient ancestral Jewish homeland: Arthur James Balfour, Lt. - Colonel J.H. Patterson; Sir Wyndham Deeds; and Josiah Wedgwood.

Today over 15 million Christian Zionists worldwide (interestingly, more than the entire Jewish world population of 14.5 million) support Israel in advocacy, tourism and a variety of social welfare projects. And in the dangerous times ahead - with the Iran nuclear threat and rising anti-Semitism in some countries reaching pre-second World War levels, we Jews need all the friends we can get.

In fact, Gary Selikow's review of Daniel Gordis' book “How the Jewish people can win a war...succinctly captured “the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing Israel today, as well as how Israel can win what seems to be an unwinnable struggle (for survival)”.

Finally, as a Zionist Revisionist activist for 60 years, I am grateful to Abraham Buchman, former Revisionist chairman of Bulawayo Jewry, for commissioning John Simon of the University of Cape Town to tell the Jabotinsky story and also the Gitlin Library for publishing his contribution in a 26 page booklet titled “Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky – Fighter, Visionary, Zionist.”

As John Simon concluded: “For many, even in this generation, the spirit of Zion rested upon Herzl, Bialik and Jabotinsky. For better or worse, he was a great man.”

After Jabotinsky worked hard to form the first modern Jewish military units – the famous Zion Mule Corps and later the Jewish Legion as battalions in the British Army – against the wishes of Jewish anti-Zionists and the more hesitant sections of mainstream Zionism, the author noted that thereafter he was “a changed man – whether for the better or the

worse is still an open question debated in the Jewish world, but alas with ever reducing frequency as his memory fades and other issues prevail”.

Remarkably, 70 years after his death his name still evokes a strongly negative emotional response from many veteran “far leftists”, while the loyal adherents of his Zionist political philosophy still celebrate his majestic personality and courageous activism. Indeed, John Simon set out to “explore whether he was, as he has been described, the most charismatic, fascinating and controversial figure in the history of Zionism.”

While appreciating the limitations of doing justice to the memory of such a multifaceted figure within the format of a library booklet, perhaps the author might have erred in not emphasizing sufficiently the horrific background of pending catastrophe against which the drama of Jabotinsky's actions were played out.

Accused by opponents of promoting “militarism” (the forerunner of the Israel Defence Force?) he fought against the official policies of keeping a low profile and self-restraint in the face of the oppression and the mortal danger which characterized Jewish life in Europe.

After all, he was hero worshiped by millions of Jews facing potential genocide as he tried to change the mindset of mainstream Jewish leadership – instilling a sense of extreme urgency with his famous declaration: “Liquidate the Diaspora, otherwise the Diaspora will liquidate you!”

Only by reading his dramatic speeches, can the serious student appreciate the full grandeur of his vision, the nobility of his spirit and the dramatic impact he made in the upliftment of his fellow Jews in their darkest hour.

He died heartbroken in New York in 1940 and was buried on Mount Herzl, Israel in 1964. When he died the Editor of the London Jewish Chronicle, Ivan Greenberg wrote: “The first violin in Jewry has been stilled.”

God bless his memory.

David Abel
Support Association for Zionism
George

I don't normally write letters to an editor, but I read your magazine for the first time and would like to tell you how impressed I am with the contents.

I was also pleased to see Wolfy Matz's humorous article. It is a long time since I saw him in print.

G. Rohnstadt
Johannesburg

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