

WRITING JEWISH MELBOURNE - Melbourne Writers Festival  
Thursday 17th October 1996

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"Writing Jewish Melbourne" may well seem a peculiarly narrow, even esoteric subject with which to open an International Writers' Festival, and yet, if one looks at all the material available, there really lies in it a thesis in search of an author.

In the few moments I have here, the best I can hope to do is to present you with the merest aperitif which may direct you to the larger smorgasbord to be had.

As first speaker, I have chosen a very literal approach: dealing with the writing of Jewish Melbourne in terms of location, time, people, and something of the thematic. Note that I'll be dealing solely with fiction and not with historical writings, sociological studies or memoirs.

With this rider, I come very quickly to specifics, and home in, for both geographic and chronological reasons, on Carlton.

While a substantial number of Melbourne's Jews around the turn of the century lived south of the Yarra - most, I believe, of Anglo descent - Carlton and North Carlton (which, for practical purposes, I'll combine into one as Carlton) were the locales that were more outwardly "Jewish" and, in time, the most written about by local writers. It was here that the bulk of East European Jews came around the late 19th and early 20th century, and then again post-World War II. By 1909 and 1911, respectively, both a Yiddish theatre troupe and the Kadimah Cultural Centre had been established there; while, in time, it was to see Yiddish and Hebrew schools, synagogues, Jewish grocers, kosher butchers, youth groups, the Jewish Burial Society and other institutions.

The 20s and 30s were one of Carlton's heydays, captured best by writers recalling it long after.

Although published as late as 1980, one of the most evocative, near-photographic works describing growing up in that stretch of Drummond Street between Elgin and Faraday Streets is Yetta Rothberg's short novella *Thousands of Years in the Eyes of a Child*. There, she tells

of the corner haberdashery at the time, and of the yeast-smelling cake shop, lolly shop, Salvation Army Hall, Police Station, the factory with the four gargoyles and verandah, and a lane across which rats ran rabidly, shadows fell threateningly, and where the children often played their erotic games. There is here a precision of detail and an intimacy of feeling, in a work that, although written in the third person, reads like a highly personalised memoir of a family playing out its inner dramas in a progressive disintegration which, near story's end, leads to a muted bitterness and a haunting question, "What was the purpose of the exercise?"

Covering a related period is Jean Holkner's *Taking the Chook, and Other Traumas* (1987), a series of generally humorous vignettes also evoking growing up in Carlton. At vast remove from Yetta Rothberg's darker portrait, this fun book is more playful, certainly happier, with its worst traumas having to do, among other things, with school balls, Christmas trees in a Jewish house, being too tall, being overweight, having feet that are too big, or simply with being a girl.

In mood somewhat allied to Yetta Rothberg's novella are the story "Cafe in Carlton" and the sketch "Drummond Street" by the Yiddish writer, Pinchas Goldhar. Where Yetta Rothberg and Jean Holkner were Carlton children from the outset and described it, one could say, photographically, Pinchas Goldhar came to Australia in 1928 as a 27-year-old migrant from Lodz, and when, after a period of literary silence, he found his voice, he took more of a filmic, cinematic view, telling of Carlton in a broader context of history, demography, growth and decline. I should have dearly wished to be able to quote at length from his word-sketch "Drummond Street" precisely because it reflects Carlton's Jewry in its states of flux. For, in it, he writes that, at the time that gold fever gripped the country, bringing adventurers from all over the world to Australia, Drummond Street was a Jewish street. First, Jews from England and Germany, followed by newcomers from Palestine, army deserters from Rumania, Hungary, Poland and Galicia, which made Drummond Street echo to the sounds of many spoken languages. Jewish shops and small clothing factories were opened. The street was alive. The Jews worked hard and noisily, saved penny upon penny. Good times came. The small businesses became large department stores and the little workshops, factories.

But then Drummond Street became too constricted and the Jews began to spread out to other surrounding streets and, later, to respectable seaside St.Kilda. Their little factories closed and moved to the city, Drummond Street began to die, the empty houses were sold to the new poor. From a rumbustious Jewish life were left only a few poor Jewish market stall-holders and dealers in old clothes

This had been before the war, after which Drummond Street came to life again, when Jews could again be seen, these ones with sad eyes and suffering faces, who wandered in groups down that street, wearing suits smelling of mothballs, greeting each other with 'Shalom Aleichem', asking about each other's livelihood, and joking about the Golden Country, Australia.

Had Goldhar lived beyond his 46 years - he died in 1947 - he would have seen a repetition of the earlier cycle as many of Carlton's Jews in the latter fifties and sixties moved south, to St.Kilda, Elwood, Caulfield, Brighton and Bentleigh and east, to Kew, Doncaster, North Balwyn.

Something of that movement is captured in Harry Marks' *The Heart Is Where the Hurt Is*, which, although published in 1966, and written by a fifth-generation Australian, is among the earlier significant novels written here touching upon the holocaust. His Carlton is a happier place than Goldhar's:

"Fondly, [Sophie] thinks of the Carlton days when they first came to Melbourne. 'Little Jerusalem', Gentiles used to call it, before the great exodus to St.Kilda. Hard, sad days, touched with many happinesses. Days already memories. But alive! So alive! People everywhere. Always someone to talk to. Streets vibrating with talk. Day and night. There was time to talk, whatever else had to be done. Over fences and cast-iron gates, in shops, out of shops, sitting at windows or on ribbon-like verandahs...." and so on. (P.31).

Carlton, too, is where a part of Herz Bergner's three-generation migrant novel *Light and Shadow* is set. Herz Bergner had come from Poland in 1938 and, fairly early on, turned his attention to Jewish migrant life and tensions. Likewise Judah Waten's *So Far No Further*, is, in considerable part set in Carlton, here more specifically around

Melbourne University, in a novel which tells of the love relationship between a Jewish girl and an Italian boy, originally neighbours in Richmond, who, with their respective family's increasing affluence, have moved to nicely middle class North Balwyn and Hawthorn - fairly accurate representations of crosstown movements of migrants when they "make good".

For my own part - forgive my immodesty here - I came fairly late to the Carlton scene. As an eight-year-old arriving in Australia in 1951, my trek to Carlton about which I, too, was to write, was in a roundabout way. I personally never lived there although I did have Carlton friends and often attended a Yiddish play, a celebration, a commemoration at the Kadimah. My Australian journey began in Northcote, as described in my story "Two Years in Exile", which, in my mother's words, was a wilderness which she bemoaned and which we left - perhaps more correctly fled - precisely to the St.Kilda which Harry Marks described.

When I reconnected with Carlton, with North Carlton, it was 22 years ago, in 1974, since which time, as a general practitioner there, I have presided, as it were, (as, in a sense, did Goldhar in the interval between the two migrations) over the moving on of the last of the Jewish Mohicans - moving south, moving to the Montefiore Homes, or to their final resting-place in Fawkner or Springvale.

These were people whom I felt I understood. They were, in large part, of my parents' vintage; in the main, they were migrants; many had been through the war and told of experiences similar to those of my parents and their friends - families extinguished, concentration camps, ghettos, life in hiding, exile, sometimes freakish survival, and so on, which laced many dinners throughout my youth; I was also of an age and kind with their children with whom I had frequently circled in milieus both Jewish and secular, whether in youth groups, at social functions and at university. It was natural, therefore, that when I developed my own narrative voice and thematic concerns, those older folk and their children became, in composite ways, my subjects.

While Carlton (and immediate surrounds) may, in a real sense, soon see the departure of the very last of this older Jewish guard, for me they remain, their stories not yet fully told, whether in Carlton still or, consequent upon a shift in their demographic and literary centres of gravity, around St.Kilda and Caulfield where they or their counterparts are today most concentrated. So, between Lily Brett and myself, for

instance, you will find any number of references to Acland Street, the Scheherazade, Monarch Cakes, Cosmos, Glick's, Little Jerusalem on St.Kilda Beach, and Fitzroy St which, to me, is, is my local metaphor for New York Seventh Avenue-style seediness.

In addition, I have already mentioned Harry Marks vis a vis St.Kilda (although, as an aside, his second novel, *Unicorn Among the Wattles*, is in part set in Middle Park, but here he encompasses Melbourne well beyond such a confine, just as does Maria Lewitt who, while telling, telling in her *No Snow in December* of moving to East St.Kilda, effectively sings a eulogy to Melbourne and Australia at large). Of other local writers, Ron Elisha and Yvonne Fein in their respective plays *In Duty Bound* and *On Edge* have a Caulfield "feel" about them. One other, groundbreaking work, groundbreaking in being the first work set in Melbourne's Hasidic community centred about East St.Kilda; is Sarah Ebenor's (alias for Bronwyn Lichtenstein) *The Mazel Tov* which tells of the life and ceremonials intensely involving and revolving around a formerly secular young woman who has married into that particular enclave.

So much for settings.

That is the geographical dimension. There is the human and thematic dimension as well. Here, too, I can only give the most brief synopsis and generalise, even as I know that qualifying details exist.

Where writers like Yetta Rothberg, Jean Holkner and Harry Marks have written of Melbourne in the inter-war years, they have done so as writers already fairly indigenous to the Australian terrain, with narratives of Jewish living concentrated in the main on essentially personal, domestic, family and, overall, fairly local social concerns.

Those who have written in, or portrayed, a later era - in effect, that era extending from the 1940s to the present-day - have in greater part confronted two core experiences that have affected their lives and, as a consequence, their work: migration and holocaust. This is not to say that these writers have not taken on other concerns, or that there are no other Jewish writers beyond those mentioned here. We do, after all, have novelists and short story writers like Morris Lurie, Andrea Goldsmith, and Alan Collins, Alan Collins, whose settings are those of Sydney, being very strong in Jewish content.

So we have Goldhar, Bergner, Waten, Lewitt, Harry Marks, Elisha, Fein, Zablè, Lily Brett, myself, and most recently Ramona Koval, telling in

our separate ways of much-battered people who have lost so much, who have somehow survived, migrated to Australia, and effectively, from scratch, re-established lives of sorts on shores at once alien - in landscape, language, values, ethos and culture - and not always particularly welcoming.

Goldhar, Bergner, Waten, for instance, tell, among other things, of older generations who see their children moving away, not only geographically to more up-market suburbs, but, far more painfully, in matters of tradition, observance, values, interests and adopted causes as the respective tugging back towards the familiar, the homely and the inherited at the one end, and towards the novel, secular and alluring at the other, lead to a widening of the gap between to the point of mutual not hearing. Blended into these are portraits of the new arrivals' affinity or conflicts with their adopted land, their rapport with, or wariness of, their Gentile neighbour, their perennial concerns with cross-marriage, assimilation and their people's continuity.

The younger writers, on the other hand, reflect the obverse side of coming of age in immigrant, holocaust-affected families. So, we have playwright Ron Elisha showing a Jewish son's intention to marry a non-Jewish girl foiled by his father's evocation of his own experiences in the war. Some four stories of my own similarly deal with Jewish boy-Gentile girl marriage or relationships. Yvonne Fein tells of a son learning that his father was a concentration camp kapo. Arnold Zable, although portraying a far more loving relationship between himself and his parents, is no less possessed by the holocaust, having had to make a personal pilgrimage to his parents' Poland to reconnect with his primal roots to write his *Jewels and Ashes*. Meanwhile, Lily Brett, both in verse and prose, too, returns repeatedly to family dynamics seemingly se predicated upon the holocaust, just as Yiddish poet, Jacob Rosenberg, is profoundly driven by the theme.

What I have mentioned above are but the smallest nutshell of concerns issuing from the twin issues of migration and holocaust - more particularly today, the holocaust. Which ties in with the question: why this ongoing emphasis on the holocaust, even by a generation which has not directly known it?

We carry a legacy; we are a legacy, the legacy of parents who, often not having voice themselves, require us in some way, on their behalf and ours, to exorcise the holocaust demon. We can't escape it. To

be relevant to our present-day readers - and, whatever else literature may be, to me, it is every bit about being relevant - to be relevant, we are compelled to acknowledge, to make sense of it, and to grapple by our own post-holocaust sights with such perennial issues as culture and evil, barbarity and humanity, covenant, faith and sacrifice, God's place in it all and human response, along with what values and mission may we trust in when old verities and ideals lie shattered, with the prior claims of personal choice and the collective interest in matters of individual and group survival, and with the diametrically opposed leanings towards ghettoised particularism on one hand and towards covenantal Abrahamic universalism on the other.

The holocaust, as a core event in the lives of many Jews in this city is a life-experience which Jewish writers, even despite themselves, have taken on board before they - we - and our successors can become liberated to move on to the next phase of Australian Jewish creativity; this being a kind of full-circle return to the creation of new literary Carlton - whether it go by the name of St.Kilda, Ripponlea or Caulfield - with its own indigenous writers writing of the great things and the little things that take place on any day behind closed doors and drawn windows, or around the kosher butchers, synagogues, bakeries, felaful bars and bookshops of, say, Acland Street, Hotham Street, Carlisle Street, Glen Eira Road or Glenhuntly Road.

So, yes, writing Jewish Melbourne may indeed seem an esoteric subject.

But I close with a line I came across very recently, a lovely, if self-evident, remark made by American writer, Jamaica Kincaid.

"Large events operate within a single person."

Jewish Melbourne is alive and well; large events operate within each person, with each person crying out for an author.