PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Theodor Adorno

IT IS a pity that Theodor Adorno is, among Jews, best known for his oft-quoted remark that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

It is a pity, firstly, because he was wrong. Just as life goes on, so does creativity, it being the creative fictional and poetic representations of the Holocaust more than any scholarly histories and other analyses that will the more lastingly preserve it in future generations' consciousness.

It is a pity, too, because — and this fact is less well known — Adorno himself qualified his remark, stating that "it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question of whether after Auschwitz you can go on living — especially for one who escaped by accident."

And it is a pity again as, for those who have heard of Adorno at all, it has over-shadowed his wider work, amounting to 20 volumes of writings in philosophy, sociology, social psychology, aesthetics, literature and, as a student of Alban Berg, in musicology. This being the issue of an intellect that rebelled against cant and the banality of the contemporary "culture industry."

It is this aspect of his life and work that is summarised in *Adorno: An Introduction* (Pennbridge, 92pp.) by Willem van Reijen.

Born in 1903, Adorno taught at the University of Frankfort from 1931 to 1933 when, on being ousted, he migrated first to England, then to Berkeley in California. There he co-authored his most influential works, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Authoritarian Personality*. He returned to Frankfort in the 1950s where he taught until his death in 1969, being a major intellectual force among the left-wing academic youth of the Federal Republic of Germany until opposed by Maoist youth.

Where his pre-1940 work showed almost no Jewish influence, the advent of the "final solution" proved a catalysing event for his view that mankind was "sinking into a new kind of barbarism". *The Authoritarian Personality* was an inter-disciplinary attempt to establish a correlation between deep-rooted personality traits and overt prejudice, his views influenced variously by Nazism, the bureaucratisation of Soviet-type societies under Stalinist regimes, and the commodification of culture in Western capitalist-industrialist societies.

His work measures societal reality against what it pretends to be, explores its contradictions, and formulates problems within the perspective of a just and true society. Pleading for a new moral philosophy, he argued that "the only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."

Harking back to the opening comments above about the creative, Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, developed a theory of the correlation between the aesthetic and the social sphere. Authentic works of art represented "the whole", he wrote, its task being to defend truth and being oppositional and emancipatory in this age of culture industry.

SERGE LIBERMAN

Writing Jewish Melbourne *

Serge Liberman.

Serge Liberman looks at the writing of Jewish Melbourne in terms of location, time and people — his contribution to the opening session of the recent Melbourne Writers' Festival.

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 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, who came to Australia in 1928 as a 27-year-old migrant from Lodz. Where Yetta Rothberg and Jean Holkner were Carlton children from the outset and described it photographically, Pinchas Goldhar, finding his literary voice after a period of silence, took more of a filmic, cinematic view, telling of Carlton in a broader context of history, demography, growth and decline.

His word-sketch "Drummond Street" reflects Carlton's Jewry in its states of flux. 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. It is 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, 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 — 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

Pinchas Goldhar

Jean Holkner

Ron Elisha

Maria Lewitt

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A Jewish baker displays his wares at the Victoria Market. From *The Australian People*, ed James Jupp.

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 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 sét in Middle Park, but here he encompasses Melbourne well beyond such a confine, just as does Maria Lewitt who, while 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 Chasidic community centred about East St.Kilda — is Sarah Ebenor's (Bronwyn Lichtenstein's pen name) *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. 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 (whose settings are those of Sydney), being very strong in Jewish content.

So we have Goldhar, Bergner, Waten, Lewitt, Marks, Elisha, Fein, Zable, 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.

> *"We are the legacy of parents who, often not having voice themselves, require us, on their behalf and ours, to exorcise the Holocaust demon."*

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. For 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 neighbours, 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 so predicated upon the holocaust, just as Yiddish poet, Jacob Rosenberg, is profoundly driven by the theme .

These are but the smallest nutshell of concerns issuing from the twin issues of migration and Holocaust — more particularly today, the Holocaust. Which raises 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 — we are compelled to acknowledge, to make sense of it. 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.

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, felafel bars and bookshops of, say, Acland Street, Hotham Street, Carlisle Street, Glen Eira Road or Glenhuntly Road.

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.