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SEPTEMBER ■ OCTOBER ■ 1998

5759 ARRIVES

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HELLER'S MEMORIES
JEWISH?

EPHRAIM SNEH Speaks Out

LA FRANCE:
Anne Frank or
Brigitte Bardot?

WOODEN SYNAGOGUES

LZA and
AMERICAN
LABOR

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The Year 5759 Arrives

By Susan Hattis Rolef

The end of a year is invariably a time when people take stock of the events and achievements of the previous 12 months, while the beginning of a new year is a time for expressing hopes for what they wish will take place in the next 12. In Israel's case this stock taking and collective wishful thinking appears to take place (at least in the written and electronic media) more than just once a year. We do it on December 31/January 1, when a new year according to the Christian calendar begins (after all, *Yeshu'a Hanotzri* — Jesus the Nazarene — was a Jew. . .), we do it on May 14 (or the 5th of Iyar) to celebrate the proclamation of Israel's independence, and we do it on the 1st of Tishrei when the Jewish New Year begins — that is now. It is a strange preoccupation given the fact that we are not exactly short of dramatic news on a daily (even hourly) basis, which keeps the media more than busy all year round.

Unfortunately the stock taking of our national condition is no happier today, as we approach the opening of the year 5759, than it was eight or four months ago when we previously engaged in this rather futile exercise, though the time might be opportune for us to ask: what is it that we would like to be different?

In all honesty, it is not a question to which one is likely to get a single answer in Israel, since different political, ethnic and age groups are dissatisfied with the current situation for very different, frequently diametrically opposed reasons, and their hopes for change are similarly different and frequently diametrically opposed. I admit that my own hopes, most of which are undoubtedly shared by active Laborites today, are those of a middle-aged, Western/Ashkenazi Social-Liberal woman, and

the 64,000 dollar question is: if by some miracle elections will be held in Israel sometime in the course of the next 12 months, will it be possible to form a coalition in Israel that will express and try to realize at least some of these hopes?

The first, most obvious sphere in which, from my perspective, a change is desired, is in that regarding the peace process. Nothing has changed in this sphere since the appearance of the last issue of the *Jewish Frontier*, and none is expected to occur before the appearance of the next, even though Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu keeps telling us that progress is just around the corner. The reason for the lack of progress is either that Netanyahu doesn't really want it, or that he doesn't have the guts to do what is necessary to ensure it — and no one really knows where the truth lies in this respect.

No one pretends that progress in the peace process is simple. In the first place the basic fact remains that progress depends on Israel making tangible concessions in return for hopes — not promises — for a better future, and at a time when the most fanatic forces in Islam seem to be on the rise, or at least can claim to have scored some impressive visible victories over their real or imaginary enemies, this is not a drawback to be taken lightly. The question is whether one uses events such as the blowing up of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam and the murder of Jewish settlers (the current favorite targets of Palestinian terrorists) as excuses to stop or further slow down the peace process, or whether one understands that the only way to stop the enemies of peace is to invest greater efforts in trying to create a new reality.

While Netanyahu was certainly right to emphasize the fact, both by word and deed, that in the case of extreme Islamic terrorism Israel is on the side of the victims, whoever and wherever they might be, he was wrong in the last two cases of settlers being murdered (two in the settlement of Yitzhar and one in Hebron) to give in to the settlers' demands for changing the status quo in their favor — by approving the construction of permanent housing for Jewish settlers in Tel-Rumeida in Hebron, the expansion of Yitzhar (which, as it were, already has many empty houses) or allowing the Yeshiva students at Joseph's tomb in Nablus to provocatively spend the night at that dubious historical site. The fact was, is and will remain that no matter how strong the claim of Jews to the right to live anywhere in Eretz Yisrael, or how painful the murder of a Jew anywhere in Israel or the territories, if not all then at least most of the settlers will have to move back to parts of Eretz Yisrael that are located on the Western side of the Green Line, before a real change can take place in the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

As to peace with Syria, it was very encouraging to hear Minister of Defense Yitzhak Mordechai say that the depth of the Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights will be affected by the scope of the security arrangements to which the Syrians will agree. This is, more or less, what Yitzhak Rabin started saying back in 1994. However, while Rabin continued to express his views loudly and clearly, even in the face of vicious criticism, after having uttered the brave words Mordechai started pussy footing in the face of attacks on him from within the government, while Minister of Infrastructures Ariel Sharon has initiated the construction of new housing projects on the Golan Heights — a move which was hardly designed for the purpose of encouraging negotiations with the Syrians.

A brave, positive sentence bandied around here or there by one of our leaders is certainly refreshing, but what Israel needs is brave, positive actions, even if they draw fire from various quarters. If peace is a real goal (and one is inclined to include Mordechai among those Israeli leaders who really and truly want peace) then it is necessary to adopt appropriate strategies and tactics to move towards it and pursue them.

The same applies in the economic sphere. While the rate of inflation is impressively low these days and the recent reduction in the rate of interest by the Bank of Israel is certainly welcome (though it isn't clear who we should thank for the latter — the Prime Minister or the Governor of the Bank of Israel), one would like to feel that the Government is pursuing a serious policy of economic expansion which will reduce the rate of unemployment in real terms (not just in formal statistics that artificially remove names from the official lists of the unemployed) and accelerate the rate of economic growth. We are not getting that. Minister of Finance Ya'acov Ne'eman (whose proposals make a lot of economic sense, but who is unlikely to manage to get any of them implemented) is pulling in one direction, the Governor of the Bank of Israel, Professor Ya'acov Frenkel — a one trick horse, if ever there was one — in another; various interest groups (such as the *haredim*, the settlers) in a totally different direction; while the Prime Minister seems bent on introducing "election economics", the only positive message of which is that Netanyahu apparently takes the prospect of early elections (in January 1999?) seriously.

But this is not what Israel needs. Israel needs a strong Minister of Finance, who after mapping out clear policy goals will work out the strategy and tactics to achieve them, with the full backing of the Prime Minister and the Governor of the Bank of Israel. One might look back nostalgically at the situation in 1985, when the late Minister of Finance Yitzhak Modai (Likud), with the full backing of Prime Minister Shimon Peres (Labor) and Moshe Mandelbaum (National Religious) as Governor of the Bank of Israel, got the Israeli economy back on track (Israel was rapidly approaching a four digit rate of inflation at the time), even though a high price was paid in terms of many private companies, kibbutzim, moshavim and *Koor* going financially broke. But there was a way, there was determination and there was a feeling that someone was steering the economic ship of state back to safe waters.

Another sphere in which one would like to see a change in the coming 12 months is in that of the growing fragmentation in the Israeli society. In the last 21 years since the "political upheaval" that brought the Likud to power for the first time since the establish-

ment of the State of Israel, the Israeli society has moved rapidly away from the Labor Movement's melting pot ideal. However, while consciously moving towards the "garden of many flowers" model, nobody seems to have any clear ideas on how to prevent this garden of many flowers from turning into a battleground among different species that seek to devour each other. From time to time someone gets up — either from within the Coalition or from within the Opposition, and sometimes even from among business circles — and with the help of clever copywriters tries to sell the idea of "dialogue", "listening to each other" or "opening a new page."

The problem is that all these efforts, serious and sincere as they might be, are fragmented and do not involve a clear perception of what a balanced "garden of many flowers" looks like. Thus, Minister of Education and Culture Rabbi Yitzhak Levy has called for a serious religious-secular dialogue and for the religious camp giving up battles that merely lead to greater tensions in the society (for example, regarding the battle over *non-kosher* butcher stores), but at the same time his Ministry has cancelled events, whose goal was to deal with diversity in the society, if these involved the participation of homosexuals and lesbians.

Or an example from the Opposition.

While Labor Party chairman Ehud Barak asked for the forgiveness of the Jews of Muslim country origin in Israel for the haughty attitude of the Ashkenazi élite towards them in the past, one of his closest colleagues in the party, MK Ori Orr, slipped badly in an interview when he complained that "I cannot talk with these people (the members of the Labor Party faction of Muslim-country origin) the way I speak with other people who are more Israeli in their character. Every time you say something, they immediately jump, and get insulted and hurt, and start going wild. They

have sensitivities and honor problems, and that results in it being impossible to hold a normal conversation with them." Like Itzik Mordechai in the case of the Golan Heights so Orr in the case of the "Orientals" argued that he had been misquoted or misunderstood, and started driving around the country from one development town to the next to explain to anyone willing to listen what he had really meant and why a real and honest dialogue is needed. But despite Orr's naive efforts, the bottom line remains that he destroyed several carefully nurtured flower beds in the garden, much to Barak's chagrin.

However, the greatest problem today, in this respect, is that Israel has a Prime Minister who is more concerned with beating the old élites (whom he identifies with the various social groups that have traditionally been identified with the Labor Party) than with bringing greater harmony into the society, and a Minister of Defense for whom beating the old élites involves ethnic considerations, which *inter alia* resulted in a problematic choice for Israel's new Chief of Staff — Shaul Mufaz, who is a fine officer of Persian origin, but lacks experience in certain vital spheres.

What Israel needs in the social sphere is a good "gardener" — a man (or woman) who is truly liberal and tolerant but at the same time understands that there is need for an unbiased guiding hand to ensure that the diversity does not lead to destructive disharmony. It must also be a man (or woman) who is both deliberate and careful in the choice of words. This will be even more important after the elections to the 15th Knesset, which promises to be even more fragmented and diverse than the 14th. Unfortunately, there aren't many men or women of this description in the Israeli political system today.

But one can hope and dream, and who knows, maybe the year 5759 will be different.

— SHANA TOVA



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5759

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AND FULFILL HERZL'S DREAM!



LZA and the Progressive Jewish Agenda

By Michael Perry

This article is based on the address delivered at the LZA national convention in Detroit in June.

The Labor Zionist Alliance has a long and proud tradition of activism in every sphere of Jewish life. Yet there are those in our organization and in the broader Jewish community who puzzle over LZA's involvement in areas outside of Middle East politics. Should LZA be concerned about the American as well as the Israeli scene? And if so, what is our agenda?

The first question is self-evident to many LZA activists: we must be involved because we live here. We have cast our lot with America. We are committed to *labor* Zionism (as opposed to religious, "general," or some other form of Zionism) in part because of our support for a core set of social and economic justice principles. We are simply destined to be involved, at home as well as in Israel.

And if we are destined to be involved, what is our struggle here? A good place to start is the widening gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in our society.

With near record low inflation and unemployment, this might seem unnecessarily pessimistic. In many ways, things have never looked better. But the income of the poorest 20 percent of families continues to decline, while the share of national income going to the top five percent is at the highest level the Census Bureau has ever recorded. These developments are consistent with a long-term trend in which gaps between rich and poor have continued to widen, with the benefits of income growth accruing disproportionately to the affluent. These conditions, if not addressed, will weaken the social fabric of our nation.

What is to be done? LZA's agenda should include raising and indexing to inflation the minimum wage, which in real dollars is still below historical norms and the federally defined poverty level. It should include sustaining former welfare participants by ensuring adequate funding for job training and support services such as childcare and transportation to work, while raising food stamp benefits. It should include eliminating sweatshops, which we thought had been accomplished by the Jewish labor movement in our parents' or grandparents' age, but which are again a pestilence haunting New York, Los Angeles, and other major garment manufacturing centers.

A progressive Jewish agenda would include supporting public education and opposing challenges to church-state separation in the form of vouchers, no matter how appealing Jewish day schools may seem as an antidote to assimilation. It would include support for compensatory education, training, job counseling, and intensive recruitment of minorities and women. It would guarantee access to health care for the uninsured and underinsured, and preserve Medicare and Medicaid as basic entitlement programs (upon which two-thirds of nursing home residents, including many Jewish elderly, rely). And it would ensure that government surpluses are used not for a tax cut but for employment, health care, housing and other programs that were cut sharply and disproportionately in the effort to eliminate the federal deficit. In short, a progressive Jewish agenda would ensure that the federal gov-

ernment fulfills its primary responsibility to provide for the needs of its most vulnerable citizens.

The LZA has no shortage of allies in the fight for these issues, and they can shift from battle to battle. On church-state issues, our allies might include the ACLU and People for the American Way. On poverty issues, they might include the Catholic Church. And there is one organization that is an ally on virtually all these social justice issues, an ally that the Jewish community often ignores — the AFL-CIO.

Many Labor Zionists are more familiar with changes in the role of the Histadrut in recent years than they are with the changes in our American labor movement. This is ironic, because support for the American labor movement is a fundamental part of the progressive agenda.

Three years ago, the AFL-CIO elected a new slate of leaders, who have devoted enormous energy to two key tasks: organizing and political action. Union organizing is tremendously difficult. (It is even harder than organizing new LZA branches!) It takes a long time to see the results of organizing campaigns — the AFL-CIO would have to organize 300,000 new members every year just to maintain its current low level of representation (14 percent) within the American workforce. But the AFL-CIO and its affiliates are dedicating the resources to this task, and have energetically worked to create an “organizing culture” within the labor federation. And unions are starting to win some big victories.

Political action is just as difficult as union organizing, but carefully targeting resources and mobilizing well-organized troops can have a big impact. Indeed, the AFL-CIO has been so successful in recent years that Republicans in Congress have zeroed in on unions as their number one target. They have attempted to secure “reforms” through state initiatives and legislation that would defund organizations representing workers while leaving business political contributions untouched. Workers and their allies in the public — the AFL-CIO could never defeat such efforts, as it recently did in California, without broader public support — must expend political capital stopping

these attacks. But it is heartening to know that the labor movement's political strategy is strong enough to get the attention of those opposed to reforms that are needed to narrow the gap between rich and poor. They well know who is also playing a key role in blocking their efforts to gut the federal government.

So the good news for the Jewish community is that the labor movement is back. This is especially good news considering that, by and large, the AFL-CIO's agenda is the Jewish community's agenda. If you analyze the organized Jewish community's position on virtually any domestic policy issue, you will find that it is almost always very similar to the position of the AFL-CIO. Who should the Jewish community work with to secure its most important domestic goals? We could do very well just working with the American labor movement.

So what is to be done? The LZA must be more involved in social justice movements and campaigns. We should support the United Farm Workers of America when they ask for support for strawberry workers in California, and we should join legislative coalitions to support issues like the minimum wage. We must also develop a strategy for working within the umbrella bodies with which we are affiliated in the organized Jewish community to fight for these principles at home and within the State of Israel: the Presidents Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations, the AIPAC, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (formerly the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council) and Federation-affiliated Jewish Community Relations Councils. We can wield real influence through these bodies, and we should develop a strategy to do so. For in many respects, we have been leaving open the floor to conservative organizations that do not love America or Israel more than we do but that have tried to claim that mantle from us.

The progressive Jewish agenda involves multifaceted battles on many fronts. It includes the fight for a humane, pluralistic Israel that is committed to the peace process. It includes the fight for a humane, pluralistic America. With courage and commitment, the LZA can make a real difference in this struggle. This is our challenge and our charge. □

A Conversation with Ephraim Sneh

By Henry L. Feingold

Ephraim Sneh, a former Brigadier General in Israel's army, has emerged as one of the leading strategic thinkers of the Labor Party. In appearance, the 52-year-old Sneh is a classic Alpine type, round-headed and stocky with a full head of salt and pepper colored hair. He has dark expressive eyes and speaks an almost perfect rich English with a sharp guttural Israeli accent. Following graduation from the University of Tel Aviv medical school in 1972 he served in the Israeli army for the next fifteen years. During the Entebbe operation he was in command of the special medical team. At the culmination of his military career he headed the IDF's Civil Administration of the West Bank. In 1992 he was elected to the Knesset and two years later accepted an appointment as Minister of Health in the Rabin cabinet. He was reelected to the Knesset in 1996. One can sense the reason why Ephraim Sneh is regarded as a "comer" in Israel's Labor Party from the thoughtful way he responded to our questions.

We met on a sunny Thursday (September 10th) in the cluttered LZA national office on 7th Avenue in Manhattan. The interview began with a note of humor when Nahum Guttman, our editor, complained that he was not feeling so well. Sneh responded without missing a beat, "Don't worry; you're with a doctor." Sneh's mission for the Labor Party is to strengthen the Party's ties to the Labor Zionist Alliance. Some in the room may have remembered this was not the first time such rhetoric had been heard but the Sneh mission seemed to be different, more serious and more ready to listen. The Sneh mission apparently considers our own LZA as a centerpiece for a new strategy

that is based on the assumption that American Jewry has a role to play in the Israeli polity.

For the old-timers among us who were convinced that the Labor Party had long since written off its American chaverim that came as a refreshing bit of news.

What follows is a recounting of that encounter based on notes and memory, surely not the best way to transmit a wide-ranging discussion. Predictably, the first question put to Sneh concerned the motivation of his mission. Had there really been a change in policy towards Labor Zionists who had not made aliyah? Sneh's response was surprising in its forthrightness. He would not characterize it as a "change" in the sense of a radical departure from prior policy but there was a new appreciation of LZA's potential as a partner of the Israel Labor movement. The new posture was rather part of a "natural process," which led to a realization that in the linkage between chaverim in the Diaspora and the Israeli polity we Americans cannot simply be written off. After the bitter debate on conversion in the Knesset it became apparent that the influence, especially of American Jewry, transmitted through religious linkage and money, could play a crucial role in political developments in Israel. The Ben-Gurion definition of the Diaspora's role: "If you will not settle in Israel or failing that, give money, then you can have no voice in its affairs," was no longer tenable.

The influence of the Diaspora is everywhere in Israel, especially at the flash-points of the Arab-Israel confrontation, Jerusalem and the West Bank settlements. On the political right, wealthy American Jews of the Orthodox persuasion were using their millions and their ability to deliver a

large voting bloc to sharpen the confrontation with the Palestinians. The result was that it was already requiring additional expenditures and sometimes the lives of Israeli soldiers to restabilize areas like East-Jerusalem and Hebron where such incursions had occurred. Sneh went as far as declaring that it may have been the last-minute spending of millions of dollars from American sources and the direct intervention of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Schneerson) that allowed the Likud to claim victory by the narrowest of margins in the last election. By changing its policy the Labor Party was only acknowledging what the Israeli electorate already knew concerning the role of the Diaspora in Israel's affairs. According to Sneh a recent poll shows that 60% to 70% of Israelis express great fear that the fall-out from the conversion issue will further weaken the support of Jewish communities overseas. That there is a danger of increasing isolation from the world.

Before we met, Sneh had already spoken to an expanded meeting of our Administrative and New York City Committees and the young chaverim from Habonim, but the Northwest Airlines strike caused a cancellation of his trip to Detroit. Instead he spoke to the chaverim by phone. Trips to Chicago and Philadelphia were scheduled, and Sneh promised to visit the West Coast on another occasion. I asked Sneh for his first impressions of the American movement. Again his response was forthright. He was particularly impressed with our younger affiliates. Their questions and level of knowledge confirmed his sense that a renewal of the American Labor Zionist movement was in process. I presume that he could not read my silent thought which ended with the words "from your mouth to God's ear." (There are LZAniks who do not hesitate to enlist God in our enterprise. Others are convinced he/she would never join us.)

Sneh then discussed another reason for the growth of the new sensibility regarding the role of the Jews of the Diaspora in Israel's internal affairs. The principle of the centrality of Israel embodied in the Jerusalem platform has not changed, explained Sneh. Rather there has developed a new awareness that formidable intellectual resources vital to the growth of Israel's economy and culture remain concentrated in North America. The correct model to enlist these crucial resources must be "partner-

ship" rather than conditionality. I presume that means that American Jewish scientists, technocrats and capitalists do not have to make aliyah in order for Israel to make use of their knowledge. But that is nothing new.

The discussion then turned to the peace process and Israel's bitter culture wars. The two are intertwined. In this phase of the discussion we could get a full sampling of Sneh's cool approach. He began by rejecting the notion that there is a "silent civil war" in Israel that may come to the surface once the security problem is resolved. But he is convinced that the "fate and character" of Israel in the 21st century is linked to the outcome of these related conflicts. He does not believe that the current coalition of Right wing and religious parties will dominate Israel's government in the future. In the long-run Israel's secular Jews outnumber those that support the current coalition and play a more important role in assuring the security of the State and the development of the economy. Sneh feels that the conflict between secular and religious Jews is unresolvable and has inherent in it a remote threat of unraveling Israel's society. At the end of the line there is no possibility of resolving the conflict. One either is a *shomer shabat* or one is not. What is developing is a one people composed of two separate cultures and communities. Victory of one over the other is not possible. In order to coexist they must find accommodation and bridges. Sneh cited the model of two adjacent Israeli communities, B'nai Brak and Ramat Gan, that are geographically proximate but in terms of governing cultures remain a millennium apart. The question is whether two such antagonistic cultures can learn to "respect" each other and develop political skills that somehow permit wiggle room to accommodate the differences. The political problems arising out of the "Who is a Jew" question impinge upon ever-widening circles of Israel's everyday life. The conflict was once confined to marriage and divorce laws and running public transportation on the Sabbath but today it concerns the "law of return," service in the IDF, the distribution of government revenues. Soon the very fundamentals of Israeli domestic and foreign policy are bound to become involved. Sneh does not underestimate the gravity of the problem but he remains confident that it can be solved by a "two cultures but one people" formula. Inter-

estingly, when it was pointed out that without the image of the *Halutz* (pioneer) and the *kibbutz* there is little that motivates young people to make *aliyah*, Sneh answered simply that the desire to live in a Jewish state should be sufficient. Unanswered is, whose Jewish state, the "Jewish" of secular peoplehood or the "Jewish" of Agudath Israel?

Queried about the dismantling of Histadrut, Sneh confided that it was badly handled and that probably Haim Ramon had gone too far. The concept of trade unionism in Israel has always gone beyond mere bread and butter matters. It is true that Histadrut's rigidity and inefficiency required some changes but rather than reform, Ramon dismantled an institution that not only gave Israel's society social cohesion but generated at its grass roots level a drive for social justice. These are values rooted in Torah and should not be lightly discarded in favor of cold market forces. Sneh feels that Israel's future lies with a mixed economy rather than one in which market

forces are given total free play. Such an economy will have high tech anchored in the private sector as its center of gravity but workers will still need their unions for protection and cohesion. In the meantime he acknowledges that the dismantling of Histadrut has weakened the Labor Party.

Most eloquent were Sneh's final observations on the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. Like many Labor leaders he feels that the end of Israel's dependency on the largess of Jews overseas has come. Now Israel must be ready to meet the responsibility its demographic and cultural pre-eminence assigns it. He said something like this: "Once there was a Jewish people who cared to preserve the existence of the Jewish state. Today it is high time for that state to preserve the existence of the Jewish people."

I thought that if we have indeed arrived at that historical juncture, a *shechehyanu* is in order. □

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Wooden Synagogues

By David Rosenthal

Among the most original creations of Jewish architecture in Poland were the wooden synagogues, which fascinated artists and researchers in Poland and abroad. Some art historians spoke of these houses of worship as national landmarks. On the eve of World War Two, a number of French professors and scholars issued an appeal for the study and preservation of these medieval synagogues. A request was also sent to the Rector of the Warsaw Polytechnic Institute, Prof. Oscar Sosnowski, asking that the "Society to Preserve Monuments of the Past" (of which he was the chairman) preserve the synagogues under its aegis.

The wooden synagogues were built in the smaller Jewish centers after the royal decrees of 1648–49. With their appearance, Jewish art became almost the diametrical opposite of what it had been in previous periods. On the outside, these synagogues appeared to be poor wooden barracks, seemingly ascetic structures. On the inside, however, they sparkled with warm colors, marvelously carved Arks, columns, cornices, and colorful ornamentation. Inside them nestled the fervor and spirit of Polish-Yiddish speech and song; inside them bloomed the Jewish symbolism of lions, doves, zodiac signs, leviathans, oxen of the hills, the quadrilateral letters of the Hebrew alphabet — in a word, Jewish antiquity and its mythology. Here Jewish roots combined with Slavic sentimentality and brilliance of color.

Some years before the Germans destroyed the wooden synagogues, Dr. Schipper characterized them in these words:

"Although there exist in the artistic form of the wooden synagogues many of the themes and symbols of previous periods, their inter-

nal rhythm and feeling has changed. The partly secular element which was once so clear has now disappeared almost completely. The etchings and carvings are somehow pervaded by a religious spirit. From them comes a mystical excitement which is characteristic of the entire period. Art distanced itself from the West and assumed a more and more Eastern quality. In a certain sense, this is a kind of Eastern baroque which reaches for the sky and — as though in prayer — expresses the fervor of the soul. One can feel in the art an uneasiness and an air of expectancy. It was engrossed in the coming of the Messiah."

The art of the wooden synagogues also anticipated later developments in art. This forecasting could be seen quite clearly in the synagogue in Mohilev, where the drawings evoked associations with the artistic vision of Marc Chagall several generations later. The polychrome in this synagogue was done in 1740 by Hajim Segal, son of Yitzhok Segal of Sluck, a great-grandfather of Chagall. (See Schipper's *Jews in Independent Poland*, particularly the chapter *Jewish Artists, 1650–1795*.)

On the ceiling of the synagogue in Mohilev, Segal painted a whole menagerie of wild and domesticated animals: fish and birds, all in motion, with the stronger ones stalking the weaker. Above them shone the stars, which were turning into flowers. In one section of the ceiling were some animals with human faces, variously expressing grief, anger, reflection, and joy. On the highest point of the ceiling, the artist painted an apocalyptic beast with three heads. The polychromes on the north and south walls of the synagogue were also done in bright colors. On one of these walls, Segal

painted Jerusalem, and on the opposite wall, Worms, one of the oldest Jewish communities in Germany, where some eight hundred Jews were massacred in 1096 (an event mentioned in the Lamentations for Tisha b'Av). The artist portrayed the city of Worms as a tangle of houses and towers reaching toward the sky and surrounded by a thick wall. Not far from the city swam the Leviathan, an enormous whale with a bloodied nose and an extended tongue. Other decorations pictured lions and mystical hands holding tablets of the Ten Commandments. Everything was done in warm colors, in ambers and brick reds.

Another ornately decorated wooden synagogue was the synagogue in Przedborz, adorned in rich but quiet colors in 1760 by the artist-woodcarver Yehuda Leib. (The carvings of bright, white tablets containing prayers were a later addition.) Various traditional symbols such as grape clusters, plants, lions and deer were carved on all the posts and columns. On the west was a new painting — a fantasy city with church towers and branches of trees holding musical instruments with which to sing the praises of God. Unmistakably inspired by the psalm — “By the waters of Babylon I saw” —, the painting was also an allusion to the sad state of the Jews at the time the work was painted.

The wooden synagogue at Olkeniki is immortalized in Chaim Grade's reverent poem, “Torah Sages of Lithuania,” in which he refers to it as the old *shul* at the Mereczanka River.

“The Olkeniki *shul*, all its towers without nails or metal, carved out of wood, is world famous. It is a byword in Lithuania and Poland . . . If you have once stood on its threshold, it will follow you all the years of your life. Its Eastern Wall sparkles sunnily before you and in your dream you will hear the wings of its cherubs . . . Embroidered on its cloth are four golden crowns and swords, flags and golden trumpets, golden is every fold, with silver letters and needlework flowers . . .”

The Olkeniki synagogue was constructed in 1798–1802 by the Jewish community with the help of Prince Granowski. The artist and manager of the work was Mordecai ben Gershon, whose signature was written on the ceiling. The Ark of the Torah was beautifully ornamented. The decorations on the doors and curtain were in three parts, symbolizing the three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priest-

hood (with the priestly hands), and the crown of royalty on the head of an eagle. The eagle held a shofar in one talon and a *lulav* in the other. Between the Torah crown and the crown of priesthood stood a pyramid with the names of the twelve tribes. On the wall to the left of the Ark hung a large metal reflector. Similar reflectors still decorate the Polish royal palace — the *Wawel* in Cracow. The bimah, with its little coverings and vases, was reminiscent of a canopy of garlands, festooned with wreaths of leaves, flowers, and fruits. (Based on Shlomo Farber, *Yizkor Book of Olkeniki*, pp. 68-84.)

Another beautifully-decorated synagogue was found in the city of Gombin. Every Jewish city in Poland had its own honorable history and Gombin was no exception. It was the home of the great scholar and *Tsadik*, Abraham-Abele Gombiner (1635–1683), author of *Magen Avraham*. The community was also proud of its Jews who had migrated to Gombin in the days of the Crusades. It was proud of its young people. And it was proud of its wooden *shul*, the symbol of Jewish autonomy on Polish soil.

The synagogue in Gombin, along with Yehuda Gombiner, the renowned woodcarver whose handiwork decorated Arks of Torah in Snia-dowa, Nasielsk (Warsaw province) and other Jewish communities, is described by Gedaliah Shaiak in his book *Force and Defiance*:

“The synagogue was constructed in a Baroque style, with wings on the upper floor and two onion-shaped towers. The building had two entrances. Broad windows faced the street in front. When the lights in the synagogue were turned on for Sabbath or holidays, the copper reflectors and chandeliers threw back beams of light, illuminating the darkness outside. The hand-carved Ark of Torah with ornaments on Biblical themes was a masterpiece . . . Jews in the town were proud of their *shul*. They believed firmly that the Divine Presence rested on the synagogue, because despite the frequent fires which destroyed neighboring streets, the Gombiner *shul* was never damaged.” (pp. 162-63)

The merit of the wooden synagogues in the small town was also noted in old Polish church records. One report has survived, for example, concerning the synagogue in Wlodawa, a town in the Lublin region, which was built in 1684 and restored in 1764 with the help and permission of the Czartoryski family. A note in the local church archives provides evidence of

the recognition given this synagogue: it states that "the Jews in Wlodawa have erected a synagogue which is among the ornaments of the city." (See *Ancient Synagogues in Wlodawa and Chencin*, by T. Baronowski, p. 58, in the *Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute*, No. 29, Warsaw, March 1959, Polish.)

As early as 1913, there was a demand for the preservation of the historical worth and character of the wooden synagogues. The *Yudische Velt* (published by *Vilna Farlag* of B.A. Kletskin) called upon the Jewish community to provide funds for the repair and restoration of the old synagogues, so that they not meet the same fate as the synagogue in Nasielsk, which was razed "because it was so old." (A. Zavloner, *A Jewish Museum*, pp. 117-125)

But it was not only a matter of preventing the ravages of time. There was another danger which came from inside, from a lack of understanding of the cultural-historical value of these synagogues. "We must take care," urged Zavloner, "that in the restoration we keep intact the ancient style, that the *gabbaim* not get the idea of 'beautifying' their synagogue, as so often happens, and with one stroke of the paintbrush destroy old works of art. The 'reproduction' of the original stylized chandelier of

Vilna's old synagogue demonstrates the havoc that 'modernizers' can achieve. The new chandelier, with the electric bulbs that they stuck on it, really looks like a picture of our Mother Rachel with the latest hairdo! The community will have to take appropriate steps to prevent such vandalizing of our ancient landmarks."

Products of literary culture such as language, folktales, and belles lettres can be transported to all corners of the earth. It is different, of course, with buildings, tombstones, and other "immovable objects." When one emigrates to another place, one leaves those things to the care of Providence. Thus, through the centuries, invaluable Jewish artistic treasures were lost. And then came the German murder-and-looting expeditions.

The Germans began the war against the Jews by burning and destroying the "paper bodies" of Jewish books, by gutting unique houses of Jewish worship, by ravaging hundreds of synagogues, by smashing and grinding up old gravestones into paving materials. What survives is only a small amount of written material, composed before the war, about the treasures of Jewish art. Thus that epic of Jewish life lives on in the rescued books, so that we can at least keep alive in our memory a reflection of our glorious past. □

URIAH LEVY

(continued from page 23)

of himself above his grave on which he wished inscribed: "Uriah P. Levy, Captain of the U.S. Navy, and father of the law for the abolition of the barbarous practice of corporeal punishment in the Navy of the United States."

Monticello went to one of Uriah's nephews named fittingly Jefferson Levy who with his family maintained the house until 1923 when it was purchased by a public foundation and made into a historic site. □

THEY SERVED WELL . . .

In the account of the LZA convention published in our previous issue, the names of the two chief architects of the successful June conclave in Detroit were inadvertently omitted. Here they are: Shlomo Drachler and Mel Seidman, co-chairs of the event. *Yashar koach!*

Best Wishes

Jewish Frontier

Fraternal greetings to our brothers and sisters in the Israeli labor movement. The American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO supports Israeli labor's struggle to develop a better society for all Israelis.

APWU

AMERICAN POSTAL WORKERS UNION, AFL-CIO

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La France:

Anne Frank or Brigitte Bardot?

By Haim Chertok

I recently read that Marek Halter, the distinguished French Jewish writer, had been chosen to receive a literary prize in the Mediterranean city of Toulon. However Toulon's mayor, a member of Jean-Marie LePen's racist National Front Party, overruled the awards committee, and Halter got dumped in favor of Brigitte Bardot, that enduring ornament of French culture who happens nowadays to be a supporter of LePenism. In the 1997 legislative elections, the National Front took fifteen per cent of the vote and today controls four municipalities, all in the South of France with its high percentage of North African immigrants.

Nevertheless, France remains my European destination of choice. It is now forty years since I took "Language and Culture" summer courses at universities in Strasbourg and Montpellier. These converted me permanently to the secular faith of my mentors: La France was, *tout court*, the pinnacle of Western civilization. As I flipped the final pages of my first novel read in the original — *La Peste*, Camus' allegory of Nazi infestation — this Bronx *boy-chik* felt more sophisticated than he ever could have imagined. Any residual doubt was vanquished by encountering the irresistibly fleshy dialectics of the selfsame Mlle. Bardot, even then (albeit with notable leftist sympathies) a political creature, in her technicolor debut on the higher cultural scene — *Et Dieu Crée La Femme*.

Not even an indelible exchange with my Parisian landlady could dent my enthusiasm. Descanting on Pierre Mendes-France, former prime minister, socialist . . . and *un juif* . . . Mme. Haudigond knew best how to cap her case: the man was not, after all, really French.

"But Madame," I protested, "his family emigrated from Spain to France back in the fifteenth century."

"Exactement," she smiled.

Although I have never doubted that Mme. A.H.'s judgment fairly mirrors a Gallic consensus, since making aliya nearly two decades ago *ma femme* and I have ascended the pinnacle as often as possible. Aside from nostalgia, cultural allure, and an opportunity to vent my paltry French, Paris serves up the best kosher cuisine on the continent. On our most recent visit, however, we forewent Paris to make our base in the provinces, especially Chartres, about fifty kilometers southwest of the capital. A tidy regional center of 30,000, Chartres is, of course, the site of a spectacular thirteenth century cathedral. During my benighted junior year abroad, I had let slip two opportunities to see it. At last I could snip loose a thread that had dangled for decades.

Immediately after checking into the Hotel de la Poste, the two of us steered a path straight for the Place du Cathedrale where, over glasses of Kronenbourger, we gazed at the unmatched spires which I first encountered in the pages of Henry Adams, historian, patrician, and anti-semitic. Viewed from without, the edifice is truly stunning, but as soon as we entered the vast, dark interior, I confess that my aesthetic detachment dissipated with alarming speed. Yes, the detail, intensity, and clarity of the stained glass, which had been removed for safe-keeping during World War II, were remarkable. And yet for this Jewish visitor, the cathedral at Chartres was ominous with implication. The most alienating encounter did not stem

from confronting the standard Christian motifs but struck unexpectedly when I stood before stained glass panels depicting the Ten Commandments: the left plate displayed Roman numerals I, II, and III; IV through X were crowded together on the right. The disequilibrium, echoing the unmatched spires I had earlier admired, now felt emblematic of how Judaism had fared historically in the heartland of Europe. It tore away an old scab.

Emerging in the dying light more oppressed than elated from the bowels of the cathedral, I was suddenly impelled to trudge half-way across Chartres toward where our visitors' map indicated lay "Anne Frank Square." This took us along Promenade de Charbonners Jeu de Paume, a commodious, tree lined pedestrian strand which paralleled the massive ramparts of the city. The walkway was otherwise deserted when we chanced upon the city's war memorial. From the Franco-Prussian War to the present, the engraved names of fallen local sons and daughters were arrayed. The last to join was a member of the United Nations peacekeeping force. In the dusk, they made for an impressive formation.

Twenty names were inscribed for 1940; only three for 1941. In 1942, however, death's harvest augmented to sixteen. I jotted down the names of nine, enough for any meditative passerby to comprehend the essentials: Jean Levy, Mme. Juliett Levy, Alain Levy, Catherine (8 ans) Levy, Michelle (4 ans) Levy; Mme. Adrienne Ullmann, Mlle. Jaqueline Ullmann; Gerard Weil, Mlle. Gilberte Weil. That was the year when the Vichy government delivered its citizens who could never be French enough into the hands of the SS.

At the northern end of Chartres, just across

from a park named after Leon Blum, another Socialist prime minister who would not have passed my former landlady's muster, the River Eure forks into three streams. There may be found a small patch of greenery at whose center a street sign declares "Square Anne Frank" and displays an enigmatically smiling photo of our famous martyr. Embedded into a rock a bronze plaque reads *La Republic Française en hommage aux victimes des persecutions racistes et antisemites et des crimes contra l'humanité commis sous l'autorite de l'Etat dite 'Gouvernement de l'Etat Français' (1940 - 1944). N'oublis jamais.*

Two mornings later, when our time in Chartres came to an end, the train to Paris was delayed by a security check: there had been a terrorist bombing at Place Saint Michel; three policemen checked each car for suspicious-looking objects or passengers. An inconvenience for other passengers, for us it evoked normality — a presage of home. For the whole of the hour-long journey to Gare Montparnasse, a woman in her late twenties with a scrubbed, severe, but comely mien seated opposite the *kippa*-crowned traveler was wondrously engrossed in a new paperback edition of *La Peste*, never out of print.

Today, as in the 1940s, a saving remnant of French conscience and honor tangibly, forcibly resists denial of the past or ignorance of its perdurable presence. Fifty years later that still matters enormously. Notwithstanding the temporary successes of the National Front, with all its idiosyncrasy, exceptionalism, and self-betrayal — a charge sheet with which the Jewish people should be familiar — France remains the place where, between Tel Aviv and Manhattan, I feel least alien. □

Harriet and Ben Cohen

Wish all of our chaverim in the Labor Zionist Movement a year of good health, happiness and peace.

We also wish to extend our thanks, admiration and best wishes to

Nahum Guttman

For his valiant efforts and his great success with the continuing production of the Jewish Frontier



Shana Tova to you all!



The Firebrand:

Trials and Tribulations of Uriah Phillips Levy

By Joseph Adler

One of the most controversial and colorful figures in American naval history was Uriah Phillips Levy (1792–1862). He was born into a distinguished Sephardic family in Philadelphia noted for their patriotism and steadfast adherence to their Jewish heritage. Early in life Uriah exhibited these family traits. Although small in stature he was pugnacious, proud, and possessed a fiery temper, and an even greater ego. At age ten he went to sea as a cabin boy, and in 1806 when he was fourteen he was apprenticed to a shipmaster for four years. However, when President Thomas Jefferson declared an embargo on all American trade with Europe, the shipping industry fell idle, and Levy used the time to attend a navigational school in Philadelphia. In 1809 the Embargo Act was lifted and Uriah having completed navigational school resumed his maritime career.

In these years between the American Revolution and the War of 1812, British “press gangs” prowled the streets of American ports looking for susceptible men whom they could literally shanghai into the British Navy. American sailors who carried the proper documents were usually immune from this sort of danger.

One afternoon while Uriah was sipping coffee in a Philadelphia tavern the cry of “press gang” rang out and the place quickly emptied. Levy having a protection certificate in his pocket remained calm as a squad of British marines entered the tavern. A marine sergeant scanned Uriah’s documents, and then loudly proclaimed, “You don’t look like an American to me. You look like a Jew. If the Americans have Jew peddlers manning their ships, it’s no

wonder they sail so badly.” Levy’s temper took over and in the exchange of words which followed he punched the sergeant’s jaw. At that point he was struck from behind with the butt of a rifle wielded by one of the marines. When he regained consciousness he was in the brig of a British cutter bound for Jamaica. During the voyage he was repeatedly pressured by the British captain to be sworn into His Majesty’s Navy. Uriah each time refused on the grounds that he was an American and a Hebrew. His religion, he added, prevented him from taking an oath on the New Testament, or with his head uncovered. Taken aback by the strange youth the captain on the ship’s arrival in Jamaica allowed Levy to have an audience with Sir Alexander Cochrane. The latter after reviewing Uriah’s documents ordered his release.

By 1811, Uriah was back in Philadelphia and had saved enough money to purchase a one-third share in a schooner named the *George Washington*. Having by this time passed through every grade of service — cabin boy, ordinary seaman, able-bodied seaman, boat swain, third, second and first mates, he was designated by his partners the ship’s master. One of his first acts was to nail a mezuzah onto his cabin door.

His first command involved a cargo of corn which he carried to the Canary Islands and sold for 2,500 Spanish dollars. He then took on a second cargo of Canary wine and headed for the Cape Verde Islands. He anchored at the Isle of May where he met and became friendly with another American captain. One day while having dinner aboard the latter’s vessel, his

own ship was stolen by a treacherous first mate and his accomplices among the crew. Neither the ship nor its crew were ever heard from again. By the time that Uriah was able to get back to the United States the War of 1812 had broken out. While in New York he heard rumors that the Navy brig *Argus* was preparing to break through the British blockade of the port. Borrowing a rowboat he rowed to the *Argus*, and presented himself to the warship's commander. He sought and obtained permission to join her crew as a volunteer sailing master.

The *Argus* after breaking through the blockade, carried William H. Crawford, America's new minister to France, and then went on to prey on British shipping. The warship quickly gained a reputation as a raider along the length of the English and Irish coasts. At one point with Uriah Levy at the helm, the *Argus* found itself in the midst of a British squadron. Taking advantage of a heavy fog, Uriah managed to slip by the enemy ships without being detected.

One of the vessels captured by the *Argus* contained a precious cargo of sugar, and Uriah was assigned to take the prize to France. En route the heavily laden ship was overtaken by a British warship and the American crew captured and carried off to England and incarcerated in Dartmoor Prison. By the time that Uriah was released sixteen months later, in an exchange of prisoners, the war was over. During his imprisonment, Levy had tried to organize a Jewish congregation, but in all of Dartmoor he could only find four Jews, not enough to form the quorum ("minyan") required by Jewish law.

Back again in Philadelphia, Uriah decided against the advice of his friends and neighbors to remain in the U.S. Navy, and was assigned as a sailing master aboard the seventy-four gun *Franklin*. One evening while dancing with a lady friend at the Philadelphia Patriots Hall, Levy accidentally brushed the shoulder of a young naval officer named Lieutenant William Potter. He politely apologized and continued to dance. Moments later he was bumped intentionally by Potter. Restrained by his escort Levy turned away only to be crashed into by Potter with more force a second time, and then once again. The lieutenant obviously intent on arousing a reaction from Levy verbally abused him and shouted "cowardly Jew,

go home and sell old clothes". This time Uriah's temper flared and he slapped the lieutenant across the face. Several of Potter's fellow officers murmuring that the lieutenant had too much to drink, led him off the dance floor, while he continued to shout insults and obscenities. The next morning Uriah received a written challenge to a duel. Although duelling was technically against the law, Levy's code of honor and pride left him no choice and he accepted the challenge. A date was selected, a place in New Jersey designated, and pistols agreed on as the weapons of choice.

A large audience attended the duel. Twenty paces were stepped off, and the judge of the duel asked each man whether he had anything to say. Uriah replied that he wished to utter a Hebrew prayer, and recited the *Shema*, and then in a characteristic manner warned his opponent that he was a crack shot, and that it would be wiser to call off the ridiculous affair. Potter responded with a cry of coward, and without further ado the judge ordered the duel to begin at the count of three.

Potter fired and missed by a wide margin. Levy calmly raised his arm straight up and fired a bullet into the air. The judge ordered them to reload, and Potter promptly complied, Levy reluctantly followed suit. The second shot by Potter ended with the same result, and once again Uriah fired skyward. Now like a man possessed Potter began reloading a third time, and once again fired at Levy and missed. Uriah again fired into the air. The friends and seconds of Potter now felt the affair had gone too far for sanity, and tried to persuade the lieutenant to abandon the duel. He, however, would have none of it and for a fourth time reloaded and fired at Levy, missing again. Uriah again discharged his weapon into the air. He then cried out to Potter's aides, "Gentlemen stop him or I must."

Lieutenant Potter was now completely out of control. He reloaded and fired again, and nicked Uriah's left ear causing blood to spurt over his face and shoulder. This time Uriah held his fire altogether. Then as Potter reloaded for a sixth shot, Uriah's limits of patience and temper were reached. For the first time in the duel he calmly took aim and fired at his opponent. The bullet struck Potter in the heart, and he fell to the ground without a word, and was immediately pronounced dead by the doctor attending the duel.

In the eyes of the U.S. Navy, Levy had breached tradition. An enlisted man, a mere sailing master, had slapped an officer, and later had killed him in a duel. Such an affair was troubling to the officer class of the Navy which modeled itself on its British counterpart. Indeed, the American officer class consisted of men with old school ties who all knew each other, and who regarded themselves as gentlemen. They constituted a kind of elite club with rules and rituals and membership requirements that were inflexible. No Jew had ever been accepted into this rigid fraternity, and it was unthinkable that one would wish to become an officer — a hope that Uriah indeed desired to attain.

Fortunately for Levy the Commodore who investigated the Potter affair concluded that the lieutenant had acted badly, and that Uriah was neither the instigator of, nor the aggressor in the duel. He then dismissed the case without taking any action. A Philadelphia grand jury felt otherwise, and indicted Levy for murder. Shortly, after the indictment, Uriah found himself entangled in additional difficulties. Aboard the *Franklin* he became involved in a petty squabble with a certain Lieutenant Bond who accused him of giving orders to a cabin boy. It soon turned into a shouting match and it took two officers and two cabin boys to prevent them from coming to blows. A court-martial ensued, but ended in a draw. Both men were reprimanded by the Secretary of the Navy for unbecoming behavior.

In the interim, in Philadelphia the duelling case finally came to trial, and Levy was acquitted by the jury — its foreman noting that any man brave enough to fire in the air and let his opponent take deadly aim at him, deserved his life. Incredibly, while the naval court-martial and the civilian trial were still in process, Levy took the bold step of applying for a commission in the U.S. Navy. He based his request under a rule which stated that sailing masters of extraordinary merit and experience could be promoted to lieutenant. His appeal was successful and his commission as a lieutenant was signed by President Madison on March 15, 1817. Uriah celebrated his appointment by having his portrait painted by the artist Thomas Sully.

The officer corps of the Navy were not at all sure how to treat this brash young upstart.

The crew of the *Franklin* were also chilly and aloof to the former enlisted man. Following a cruise to England and Sicily in this hostile atmosphere, Uriah was notified that he was to be transferred to the frigate *United States*, one of the Navy's most prestigious warships. Nowhere was the club like nature of the officer class more apparent than aboard this vessel. Its captain was the aristocratic William Crane who in a letter to Commodore Charles Stewart, in charge of the Mediterranean squadron, vehemently objected to Levy's assignment to his ship. Stewart rejected Crane's plea and added that if the captain had any knowledge rendering Levy unworthy of his commission he would represent it to the Navy Department.

Prevailing protocol required that an arriving officer pay two visits to his captain — the first briefly and formally to present his orders, and the second, a longer social visit. But when Uriah was admitted to his cabin Captain Crane, without looking up from his desk stated that his vessel had as many officers as was needed or was wanted. He then ordered Levy escorted off the ship and back to the *Franklin*. It was a clear defiance of Commodore Stewart's orders and the latter immediately notified Crane that he was to accept Levy without any further delay, or suffer the consequences. Humiliated by his initial rejection Uriah returned to the *United States* and was purposely kept waiting outside the captain's cabin for several hours. Finally when admitted, Crane glanced at Levy's orders and muttered "So be it", and then returned to his paperwork without offering a handshake, or even returning Uriah's salute.

It was aboard the *United States* that Levy witnessed his first flogging. The practice was commonplace in the American Navy whose regulations were based on the British Articles of War which in turn dated back to the earliest days of the Restoration. Considered a pragmatic way of maintaining discipline it was prescribed for such misdeeds as drunkenness, profanity, stealing, and even such minor offenses as spitting on a deck, or looking sullen. Often a flogging was so severe as to destroy the muscles of a man's back and shoulders making him unable to work, and useless to the Navy.

Uriah, sickened by the hideous spectacle of the flogging, could not get it out of his mind. Soon it was whispered among the officers that he disapproved of naval discipline. One night

while standing watch he saw a boatswain's mate named Porter, with a whip in his hand, chasing after two young cabin boys. He stopped Porter and asked why he was whipping the boys. Porter replied in an insolent and mocking tone, and Levy slapped him across the face. Within an hour Uriah was called before his superior, and in the presence of Porter asked to explain his actions. Levy was taken aback by this breach of Navy etiquette in front of an enlisted man and said so to his superior. The result was a second court-martial headed by Captain Crane. He was charged with contempt for a superior officer, disobedience of orders, and un-officer like conduct. Found guilty on all three counts, Levy was sentenced by the court to dismissal from the frigate *United States's* complement. The severe sentence over so trivial a matter was so unusual that when the verdict came before President James Monroe for review he reversed the decision. By the time the news of Monroe's reversal of his sentence reached Levy he was again in trouble.

This time it was over a rowboat that he had ordered to take him ashore. Told that the boat was ready, he was about to board when another lieutenant named Williamson told him that the boat was not his. Uriah insisted that it was, and soon both men were shouting epithets at each other. Infuriated, Levy stomped off to his cabin and dashed off a note to Williamson demanding an apology. He then tried to personally deliver the note to Williamson who flung the paper in his face and slammed close his cabin door. Uriah went ashore that night and in various taverns and elsewhere read his note to anyone who would listen. Lieutenant Williamson upon learning of Uriah's behavior took action and another court-martial was underway. Levy was charged with using provoking language, lying (Williamson claimed he had never received any note), treating a fellow officer with contempt, and attempting to leave the ship without permission. The court ignored Levy's defense and quickly rendered a unanimous verdict of guilty as charged. He was then sentenced to be cashiered out of the Navy. It was early spring, 1819 — he was only twenty-seven years old, and his naval career seemed ended.

A long period of depression followed, and for nearly two years, Levy wandered about Europe. Twenty-three months after his dis-

missal from the Navy the court-martial's decision came before President Monroe for review. The president, although noting that Levy's conduct merited censure, felt that his sentence was too harsh, and that his suspension from the service had been a sufficient punishment. Accordingly he had Uriah Levy reinstated and restored to his original rank.

It wasn't long before Uriah was in trouble once again. This time the object of his fury was a lieutenant named William Weaver. The latter had called him a scoundrel and a thoroughgoing rascal. Levy dashed off an indignant letter to Weaver, but received no answer. A few days later an article, heavy with anti-Semitic undertones appeared in a Washington newspaper with allusions obviously referring to Uriah Levy. The article was unsigned, but Uriah was able to discover that its author was Weaver. Levy, however, was unable to pursue the matter as he was assigned to the warship *Spark* on duty in the Mediterranean. Ten months later the *Spark* docked at Charleston, South Carolina where Weaver was stationed. Still smarting from the insults to his character Levy took the opportunity to vilify Weaver as a coward, rascal, and no gentleman. The remarks struck home, and soon Uriah was met with a summons to another court-martial. Once again Levy was found guilty, and sentenced to be publicly reprimanded.

In 1823, Uriah was assigned as a second lieutenant to the warship *Cyane* which was being transferred from the Mediterranean squadron to Brazil. At Rio de Janeiro the ship anchored for repairs and the captain put Levy in charge of the overhaul. This delegation of authority to a junior officer angered the executive officer William Spencer who normally handled repair assignments. Word soon reached Uriah that the vindictive executive officer was out to get him.

One afternoon while the repairs were going on, Levy came aboard carrying a plank of mahogany which he intended to use to build a bookshelf in his cabin. Lieutenant Ellery, a close friend of the executive officer, confronted Uriah and in a sneering tone commented that he thought little of officers who steal lumber from ship stores. Levy insisted that he had bought the wood in town, and that in fact he had the bill of sale in his pocket. Ellery sarcastically replied that he doubted this since Levy was known by everyone to be a liar. Enraged

by this exchange, Uriah challenged Ellery to a duel which the latter refused to accept since he did not consider Levy to be a gentleman.

For several days the affair simmered only to erupt again in another burst of deliberate taunting and pettiness. In the officers' mess someone said that some damned fool had dismissed the steward who was still needed. Uriah instinctively felt that the jibe was directed at him and protested. Spencer, the executive officer who was present told Levy not to address him or he would have Uriah gagged. That was too much for Uriah and he was on his feet ready for combat as insults on his character, and anti-Semitic epithets resounded all about him. On the following day court-martial number four was on the way with the familiar set of charges.

The court returned a verdict of guilty as charged, and ordered that Levy be reprimanded publicly on the quarter deck of every vessel in the U.S. Navy in commission, and at every Navy yard. Uriah retaliated by bringing a counter suit against William Spencer and won the case. The executive officer was suspended from the Navy for a year for using insulting language and un-gentlemanly expressions and gestures against Levy. Uriah may have felt vindicated, but his victory further alienated his fellow officers, and he was ostracized and shunned. Disgusted and bitter over his treatment he applied for a six-month leave of absence which was quickly granted by his commanding officer who remarked with a smile: "We would be happy to extend your leave indefinitely." For a moment Levy hesitated and then said "It's because I am a Jew, isn't it sir?" "Yes, Levy," the officer replied, "It is."

With no official duties to occupy him, and tired of constantly fighting the naval hierarchy, Levy moved to New York City and began investing in Manhattan real estate. In four years' time the booming real estate market would make him a rich man. Still a bachelor he now began to cut a figure in New York society, and to indulge in personal whims and fancies. One of his enthusiasms was Thomas Jefferson whom he regarded as one of the greatest men in history. In 1833 Levy conceived the idea of personally funding and commissioning a statue of Jefferson and presenting it to the United States government. He

gave the assignment to Pierre Jean David d'Angers, a well known Parisian sculptor, and upon its completion it was placed in the Capitol's Rotunda in Washington. Uriah Levy next turned his attention to Monticello, the extraordinary manor house that Jefferson had designed and built for himself on a mountaintop in Virginia. The house and grounds had fallen upon hard times following Jefferson's death, and Uriah was able to buy it for two thousand seven hundred dollars.

In the midst of these activities, after twenty years of naval service, Uriah received a promotion. He immediately applied for sea duty and was assigned to Pensacola, Florida where he was to report to the war sloop *Vandalia* as its commanding officer. The *Vandalia* turned out to be barely afloat, her guns thick with rust, her decks rotting, and her crew even in sorrier shape. Unfazed, Uriah with his usual energy set about refurbishing the ship and making it seaworthy. Within a year the *Vandalia* was ready to sail.

In 1839, the *Vandalia* sailed into the Gulf of Mexico, her mission to offer support, moral or physical, to American consuls who were being insulted and harassed by Mexican officials. After anchoring his vessel at the mouth of the Rio Grande, Levy with a heavily armed guard of sailors boated upriver to Matamoros. There, Levy and his men escorted the American consul to the Mexican governor's office and gained from the latter official apologies and promises of protection of American agents and merchants. In one Mexican port after another, from Tampico to Vera Cruz, Uriah employed the same tactics with great success.

On board his ship too, Uriah was held in a curious kind of awe by the crew. From the very first day at sea he had astonished his officers by announcing that he was making innovations in regard to disciplinary measures. Flogging and other forms of corporeal punishment, such as keel-hauling, were no longer to be employed. In their place Levy installed some novel practices for enforcing discipline. Thus, for example, a man found stealing would have hung around his neck a wooden sign with the word "thief" painted on it. A drunken sailor would be confined until he was sober, with several wooden bottles hung around his neck and marked "drunkard." Remarkably, these unusual measures seemed to work. Levy was con-

vinced that to make a man look absurd in the eyes of his companions had a more lasting effect on his behavior than to torture him physically.

One day a fifteen year old cabin boy named John Thompson was brought before Levy accused of mocking an officer by mimicking his voice. Ordinarily, aboard any other naval vessel at the time such an offense would have warranted a lashing with a cat o'nine tails, but Levy had quite a different punishment in mind. Thompson was tied to a gun, his trousers let down, and a small dab of tar, the size of a silver dollar, applied to each of his buttocks. Then a few feathers were affixed to the dabs of tar. The boy was then untied and ordered to stand on the deck in this condition for five minutes to the great amusement of the crew. Uriah then addressed him as follows: "If you are going to act like a parrot, you should look like one."

Upon completing his Mexican mission and anchoring in Pensacola, Uriah expected to be commended for upholding American honor. Instead he was relieved of his command and told to await further orders. Another long period of professional limbo had begun. Discouraged, he returned to Monticello. Two years after leaving the *Vandalia* he received a notice ordering him to appear before a court-martial (his sixth) in Washington. His accuser this time was a Lieutenant Hooe who disliked Uriah's flouting of naval tradition and had been conducting a private vendetta to bring him down. The charges were patently ridiculous. They included forgery (a report submitted by Levy had through a clerical error omitted two words); scandalous conduct (Uriah had ordered the guns of the *Vandalia* to be painted bright blue); and cruel punishment (the Thompson incident).

This court like its predecessors found Levy guilty and sentenced him to be dismissed from the Navy. Uriah could not believe his ears, and returned to New York in a state of shock. The court's decision was forwarded to President John Tyler for review. A former lawyer, Tyler reading the record felt that something else than the charges levied against Uriah was involved. In addition, Tyler felt that the punishment was excessive, and asked the court to reconsider their verdict, and to mitigate the sentence from dismissal to suspension without

pay for one year. The court reluctantly honored the president's request.

The year quickly passed by, but Uriah continued to be unassigned. Apparently the Navy brass was determined to keep their most vociferous critic inactive. Levy used the prolonged hiatus in service to become richer. He busied himself with real estate ventures, moving back and forth between his homes in Monticello and New York City. Throughout this period which would extend for over a decade Levy bombarded the Navy Department with requests for an assignment and sea duty. At the same time he corresponded with the editors of newspapers in New York, Philadelphia and Washington urging them to campaign for the abolishment of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in the Navy. Uriah also lectured before public audiences on the evils of flogging. His efforts drew attention in Congress, and in 1850, Senator John Parker Hale succeeded in attaching an anti-flogging rider to the Navy Appropriations Bill. Two years later further legislation was passed ending forever corporal punishment in the U.S. Navy. Uriah Levy's contribution to this accomplishment was recognized by the public and he was hailed as "the father of the abolition of flogging". It was now twelve years since he had left the *Vandalia*, but he still dreamed of returning to active naval service.

In his sixtieth year (1852), Uriah startled his friends and neighbors. He married a young woman named Virginia Lopez. She was eighteen and his niece. Levy would later explain that he had married Virginia to protect her as her father had failed to provide any means of support, and she was penniless.

In 1855, Congress passed an act to promote efficiency in the Navy. The act included a proviso for the creation of a naval board to examine officer personnel who in their judgment were incapable of performing promptly all their duties either afloat or ashore. Within a few months after its creation the board included Uriah Levy among those officers judged incapable of further service and therefore to be removed from the rolls of the U.S. Navy. Uriah was outraged and determined more than ever before to fight this latest attempt to end his career. Accordingly, he hired Benjamin Butler, the former law partner of President

Martin Van Buren, to be his attorney. Butler immediately prepared and sent a petition to Congress in which he argued that the naval board's action was illegal, unauthorized and without precedent. The board, Butler emphasized, had conducted its proceedings in total secrecy, no evidence had been presented, nor had Levy been permitted to defend himself. Indeed, Butler flatly noted the objections to Levy were three: that he had not risen through the officer ranks in the traditional way; that he was outspoken in his opposition to corporal punishment; and that he was a Jew.

Congress after some hesitation decided that the accusations required further exploration and created a court of inquiry to hear Levy's case as well as those of other cashiered officers. At the inquiry the prosecutor unleashed its major attack against Uriah by calling to the stand a number of naval officers to testify to Levy's incompetence, unreliability, and general undesirability. Their testimony was vague and ill defined. When the defense's turn came Butler lined up no less than thirteen naval officers (all on active duty) to testify on Levy's behalf. The latter's leading witness was Commodore Charles Stewart who testified that Uriah had always performed his duties professionally, and that he was extremely competent now as he had been in the past. The other witnesses were also laudatory and pointed out that at the heart of Levy's troubles lay anti-Semitism.

When Uriah's witnesses had concluded, the court clearly expected the defense to rest its case, but Butler had saved a special surprise for the last. The courtroom doors swung open and in filed some of the most distinguished men in America. They included a senator, congressman, governor, mayor, bank president, editors, business executives, and prominent individuals from all walks of society. In all fifty-three witnesses all of whom testified to Uriah Phillips Levy's probity, character, and courage. It was an overwhelming performance, and for a time America could talk of nothing else.

However, one voice was still to be heard — that of Uriah himself. He rose to his feet and addressed the court. "My parents," he stated, "were Israelites, and I was nurtured in the faith of my ancestors . . ." Three days later he concluded with the words: "What is my case today, if you yield to injustice, may tomorrow

be that of the Roman Catholic or the Unitarian, the Episcopalian or the Methodist, the Presbyterian or the Baptist. There is but one safeguard, and this is to be found in an honest, wholehearted inflexible support of the wise, just, the impartial guarantee of the Constitution. I have the fullest belief that you will faithfully adhere to this guarantee and therefore with like confidence I leave my destiny in your hands."

The court's verdict was unanimous. Levy was restored to the active list of the Navy. The Navy's brass was embarrassed and set about to atone for the way it had treated Uriah. Thus, a few months after the court's decision the Secretary of the Navy asked Levy to take command of the sloop *Macedonian*, and sail it to join the Mediterranean squadron. Uriah accepted and asked permission to take his young wife along. It was an unheard of request, and contrary to tradition, but it was granted. In 1860, Uriah was promoted to the rank of commodore (at the time the Navy's highest grade) and placed in command of the entire Mediterranean squadron.

The years, however, had taken their toll and after six months in his new position he returned with his wife to his large house in St. Mark's Place in New York City. In the spring of that same year (1861) the Civil War broke out, and Uriah a strong unionist looked forward to rejoining the fleet. However, it was not to be as he came down with pneumonia and died in his sleep on March 22, 1862.

Uriah Phillips Levy received a traditional Jewish funeral and was buried in Cypress Hill Cemetery (Brooklyn) in that portion used by the Congregation Shearith Israel (he was a member of the synagogue). Levy had also been a charter member of Washington's Hebrew Congregation, and a sponsor of the new seminary of the B'nai Jeshurun Educational Institute in New York City.

The last will and testament of Uriah Levy reflected his fierce patriotism, eccentricity, and his great ego. He requested that Monticello, the house and surrounding acreage, be left to the people of the United States with the odd proviso that the estate be turned into an agricultural school for children of warrant officers whose fathers had died. Another part of the will called for the erection of a life size statue

(Continued on page 14)

“Life” in 1947



Labor Zionist Organization wants noncompetitive, cooperative settlements in Palestine. Under picture of Theodor Herzl, founder of Zionism, are representatives of five groups that compose organization.

The above photo and caption appeared in a 1947 issue of *Life* magazine as part of a story on American Zionism during the United Nations debate on partition of Palestine. In photo, seated are Blanche Fine, member of praesidium of Pioneer Women (now Na'amat USA) and Dr. Berl Frymer, executive secretary of Poale Zion (now LZA). Standing are Meyer Brown, president of Farband Labor Zionist Order, Isaac Hamlin, national secretary, National Committee for Labor Palestine (Israel) and Moshe Kerem, secretary of Habonim Labor Zionist youth, now a member of Kibbutz Geshar Haziv and prominent Kibbutz movement educator.

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Joseph Heller's Memories

By Sanford Pinsker

Heller-watchers have learned to pay special attention to opening sentences not only because they are central to how his compositional method works, but also because they are usually important indicators of the vision to follow. *Then and Now*, Heller's reminiscences of the Coney Island milieu that formed him and the larger world he entered, first as World War II aviator, and then as a much-celebrated writer, begins this way: "The gold ring on the carousels was made of brass. Even as kids in Coney Island we didn't believe it was the real thing." Street smart beyond their years, Heller means to celebrate the skeptical eye he and his cronies cast on the world's more glittering promises, but also to suggest that earning a free ride on the tame likes of a carousel paled before attractions that "were higher and faster, more spectacular — roller coasters — and, for fun, the electric bump-cars."

The charged word in Heller's memories of those times, those places, is *fun*. During the 1930s, he insists, things were less complicated, less dangerous, and altogether nicer. True enough, the Coney Island he calls up is hardly Sunnybrook Farm; rather, it is raucous, crowded with tourists, and often filled with life's messier edges. But it takes little more than a bowl of ice cream to wing Heller back to a world where everything *then* strikes him as better than "now." The evocations it arouses are rich in associations "extending backward in time almost to the formation of memory itself":

Like the evocations of the cookie to Proust, a meditation on ice cream soon takes me back to the age of eight or nine and into a family setting in which a small container is shared with bliss by the four of us, a mother, a sister, a brother and me . . . It's hard to believe that just half a pint of bulk ice cream could have been so satisfying to the four of us, but that was all, as I recall, that a dime paid for. More than a dime for ice cream they couldn't bring them-

selves to spend. We were prudent with money because we didn't have much, but I, the "baby" in the family, was never allowed to feel that.

Compared with the impoverished Limerick childhood that Frank McCourt starkly chronicles in *Angela's Ashes*, Heller's early years seem like a walk in the park. He was, after all, hardly the only immigrant Jewish son shielded from the ruder facts of pinched pennies and reduced circumstances. A bit of ice cream, enjoyed as a family, is the stuff of which warm memories are made. The difference is that Heller's ruminations lack the alternating currents of attraction and repulsion that give memoirs such as Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* or Irving Howe's *A Margin of Hope* their flintier edges. By contrast, Heller's narrative voice is by turns garrulous and ingratiating, nostalgically sentimental and willfully indulgent.

We have learned to expect more from autobiography than a quick skim across one's life surface; and that is why the material Heller omits often seems more interesting than the material he includes in *Then and Now*. Conspicuously absent, for example, in his "meditation on ice cream" is any mention of the father who died when Heller was five, or the dire economic straits that followed. As it turned out, his brother and sister eventually found jobs on Wall Street and at R.H. Macy's respectively, just as Heller, at sixteen, sported a dashing khaki uniform as he delivered telegrams for Western Union. And as for his now-absent father, it took some thirty years before he learned the cause (a bleeding gastric ulcer) and the circumstances of the botched operation that killed him — and, then, the discovery occurred on a therapist's couch rather than around his family's kitchen table. As Heller puts it, "About my father, I simply lost interest in him after he was gone." Even scarier, and certainly more telling, when Heller describes his funeral, he devotes more space to the money that people pressed in a six-year-old's hand than to the father they had come to bury:

The last time I was with my father or had anything to do with him was more than sixty-five years ago, on the day he was buried in a cemetery somewhere in Long Island or New Jersey. Sylvia might remember where but would be uncomfortable if I asked her, and knowing where would make no difference anyway. Until now I haven't even thought of asking. I've never grappled much with the idea of trying to find out more about him. I prefer not to. And knowing more would make no difference now, either.

I know him by his absence. Until just now, if I thought about the day of his funeral at all, I was disposed to remember it as one of the more rewarding in my young life. I sat waiting placidly on a stone bench on a stone patio with a railing, just outside the main office at the entrance to the cemetery grounds. It was summer. People milling about fussed over me. Some handed me coins — dimes, an occasional quarter. My Aunt Esther gave me a whole dollar. I felt rich.

Reading the passage above, one is tempted to look for understatement, for ironic distancing, for anything that would allow us to see this son's reaction to his father's funeral in a more conventional light. But everything about *Then and Now* implies that what we are told is what we get — and that efforts to turn Heller's prose into an exercise in soul-searching are largely wasted. The death that made the difference to Heller occurred over Avignon rather than in Coney Island; and it was Snowden's "secret" that turned him into the novelist Heller eventually became.

Still, we expect more separation of wheat from chaff, more aesthetic shaping, and most of all, more urgency when the disparate events of one's life announce themselves as an autobiography. By contrast, Heller gives us anecdote upon anecdote, with little sense that they add up to a coherent whole. Could Heller be protesting just a bit too much about the father he claims to no longer care about? Perhaps, but the book itself presents no collaborating evidence that this is how *Then and Now* works. Rather it is, in Philip Lopate's words, the "patriarchally self-assured memoir" of an aging literary lion who "roars, scratches himself, schmoozes, boasts, grouses, provides pointers and most of all, remembers." I would merely add a qualifying "selectively" to Lopate's "remembers."

Heller would have us believe that people in his immediate family were not prone to complaint or quarrel, much less to announce demands or to dish the dirt. Not that they were saints (which members of *anybody's* family are?), that they were very far removed from the handwaving wisecrackers who provide the saltiness in Jewish-American caricature. At the same time, however, he shares a bit of insider information when he comes clean about the real-life origins of the family shouting matches in *Good as Gold*:

Twenty years back, sometime around 1978, I made a trip back into the residential area of Coney Island

for my novel *Good as Gold*, just to note the changes. That Marvin [Winkler] and I met in a bar on Mermaid Avenue in itself signified a large change — a change in us that we met in a bar, and a change in our old neighborhood of Coney Island, in which a bar, and that particular bar, was the only place left for maturing people in the old crowd still living there to gather feeling safe.

"Feeling safe" is a condition Heller largely associates with the ethnically Jewish world he grew up in. With the possible exception of swimming out farther than one should to reach a distant buoy, things that *seemed* dangerous — roller coasters and other adrenaline-producing amusement rides — were the stuff of illusion rather than reality. The truth, at least as Heller reimagines it, is that Coney Island was akin to Paradise, and the decades which followed are indicators of how much this particular Paradise got "lost." Thus, when he meets Winkler, they, by chance, also run into Smokey, an old chum with the emphasis on "old":

He was getting old, he admitted, grinning and laughing as always, and he told me how he had found that out. That summer he'd been peddling ice cream on the beach, and he and an Italian kid in his twenties from down the Island had crossed into what each wanted to think of as a monopoly domain. Neither liked the competition. And the other, like Quasimodo in a different time and place, invited Smokey to settle it with fists under the boardwalk if he had a mind to. "And," said Smokey, putting his head back with a grin and basking in the tale and the memory, "he beat the hell out of me — so easily." Smokey hadn't been able to see a single punch coming, he related to me, practically boasting. "And I'm the guy that used to chase away all the other peddlers!" And that's how Smokey could tell he was getting old. (I included his account of that incident, name and all, in *Good as Gold*, as I also used Sylvia's birthday party, and the torturing wounds — not scars, unhealing wounds — of Lee's ambivalent love for our father.

Such return visits to Coney Island were few and far between. Heller came largely to get his autobiographical juices flowing, but did not roam its boardwalk long enough for the darkness that is his comic forté to settle in. After his stint in the Air Force, Heller lived in a wide variety of places — Los Angeles, Manhattan, and East Hampton — but almost never again in Brooklyn. Hence, it remained a place filled with mostly pleasant memories, but also a locale that could no more escape its aging than Smokey could escape his. As for the outrageously funny dinner scenes in *Good as Gold* that Heller now admits were fashioned from real-life experience, they simply do not square

with the stoical, non-complaining bunch he describes in *Then and Now*.

In short, there is a pattern of evasion that lurks behind too many sections of Heller's memoir. We want to know why it is that nobody in his family apparently yoo-hooed out a window, or waved their hands when making a particularly biting remark; why he didn't ask about his dead father and his family didn't tell; why life in the Heller household often seems an urban (and decidedly poorer) cousin to the one portrayed on "Leave It to Beaver":

My mother, who had been a seamstress and something of a dressmaker before her marriage, worked steadily at home at her sewing machine mending garments for neighbors and doing alterations for a cousin, Sadie Pacon, who owned a dress shop on Gravesend New Road in lower Flatbush nearby . . . When my mother noticed an apple turning soft she would briskly plan a noodle pudding that made use of it rather than have it go to waste. She took threadbare bedsheets to her scissors and her sewing machine and converted them into window curtains. If brother and sister had quarreled, she wouldn't let them go to bed until they had talked it out and made peace.

One suspects that Neil Simon could take this raw material and turn it into a sprightly Broadway play, but in Heller's memoir the passage simply sits inert on the page. It tells far more than it shows, and in the process, neither convinces us about the self-sacrificing character of Heller's mother nor about Heller himself. It is, in a word, *padding*, and that problem is not restricted to those portions of *Then and Now* that focus on the Heller family unit.

Take, for example, the heavily researched sections on George C. Tilyou and his legendary Steeplechase ride. In *Closing Time*, Tilyou is a major player in the surrealist underground world Heller constructs beneath the Port Authority bus terminal; with *Then and Now*, Heller recycles much of this material in ways that are longer on "facts" than on Heller's distinctive thumbprint:

Tilyou was a born entrepreneur. As a boy, he began accumulating capital by selling vials of Coney Island sand and bottles of Coney Island seawater to wide-eyed visitors. Even people from places with beaches of their own returned home with precious souvenirs of Coney Island sand and ocean water. His idea for a Ferris wheel, the first in Coney Island, came from one he saw while on his honeymoon at the Exposition in Chicago in 1893. He undertook construction of a copy half its size and ballyhooed it from the day he broke ground as the largest in the world. When the first of his amusement parks

burned to the ground in one of Coney Island's periodic fires, he promptly began recovering his losses by charging people ten cents to enter and to see the smoking ruins. "If Paris is France," he is reported saying, "then Coney Island between June and September is the world." This was not wholly true. Tilyou died in 1914, nine years before I was born, and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, and all that any of us knew about him was that his name was on Steeplechase Park and on one of our two capacious movie theaters, and that there was, or had been, a family home on Surf Avenue across the street from the amusement park.

Granted, the Tilyou passages have a fascination of their own, rather like the ones dedicated — again, via library research — to Coney Island's Half-Moon Hotel which, in 1940, achieved a modicum of fame when Abe Reles, a minor gangster, fell, jumped, or was pushed out of one of its windows. Reles, a native of Brownsville, was staying at Half-Moon under protective custody as a material witness in a case against some members of Murder, Incorporated. The exact cause of his death remains unsettled, but there is no doubt about the blood-spattered body sprawled across the Coney Island pavement.

Had there been more such stories, Heller's account of Coney Island might have proved more appealing, but the fact of the matter is that Tilyou's Steeplechase Park (which opened in the late 1890s) was already in decline when he was a child, and that the best thing one could say about the neighborhood is that Jewish immigrant children grew up there, and then promptly left. So, Heller (once again) pads his tale by throwing in slabs of history that tell us something about Coney Island but precious little about Heller himself:

By 1920, soon after the BMT subway company extended four of its lines into Coney Island, huge masses of people were arriving — first, tens of thousands on summer weekends, then hundreds of thousands, finally a million and more . . . A man named Handwerker, first name Nathan (a nephew went to school with me), had fortuitously opened a small hot-dog stand on Surf Avenue just across the street from the corner on which the terminal of the new subway station arose, selling his savory product from a griddle for only five cents, in contrast to Feltman's costlier boiled ones for ten cents. Feltman may have invented the hot dog, but Nathan's perfected it, and soon customers stood in packs five deep, clamoring to be served.

What the extended Coney Island portion comes to is an evocation of a world in which Heller felt "safe, insular, and secure, to a child an ethnic stronghold." Here, one could be com-

fortable with the world, sustained by the attractions of Coney Island's boardwalk and his family's "stoic, resigned, and undemanding nature." Small wonder that Bruce Gold, the protagonist of *Good as Gold* (1979), has so much trouble completing a think piece on "the Jewish experience in America": "I would do a sober, responsible, intelligent piece" [Gold tells his editor] about what it has been like for people like you and me to be born and grow up here. Certainly I'll go at least a little bit into the cross-cultural conflicts between the traditions of our European-born parents and those in the prevailing American environment." No doubt the article he has in mind will be sprinkled generously with terms such as "alienation," "acculturation," and "accommodation," but his editor has more controversial, sales-generating questions in mind: "What was it like the first time you saw an uncircumcised cock?" or "How does it feel to be screwing gentile girls?" So much for the Jewish experience in America, something that neither Gold nor his author know — or care — much about.

By contrast, *Then and Now* piles ethnic detail upon ethnic detail. If an earlier generation of New York Jewish intellectuals were already thick into their arguments with Brooklyn parochialism and deeply embroiled in the socio-political debates that raged at City College during the contentious 1930s, Heller is content to recount how he and buddies were on (mock) quests for the most satisfying amusement ride and the perfect potato knish. They were, in short, connoisseurs of the near-at-hand, and the cheap:

We learned early on that a boiled frankfurter anywhere is not as good as one broiled on a grill to the point of splitting — you only had to ingest one in a stadium at a professional baseball game to know you were tasting only hot water and mustard; that the Wonderwheel with its rolling, swaying gondolas, which is one of the mechanical attractions from our antiquity still in operation, was obviously superior to George C. Tilyou's Ferris wheel in Steeplechase Park, but that both were for sightseeing squares or for adults with children who were squares and still too young to be exposed to the terror of anything but height; that the Cyclone, which is the second old-timer still extant, was far and away the best of all roller coasters; and that it was futile to search anywhere in the universe for a tastier potato knish than Shatzkin's when they were still made by hand by old women who were relatives or friends of the family. (Although I still run into mulish people, hogs, who didn't mind the thicker, yellow Gabilla's, and to people brought up in adjacent Brighton Beach who still salivate at the mention of Mrs. Stahl's, the queen of potato knishes

there.)

Later in his life, Heller would join the likes of Mel Brooks and Mario Puzo in equally serio-comic quests for the ideal egg cream, a drink that contains neither eggs nor cream. Like the potato knish, it is nearly impossible to describe an egg cream to somebody who didn't grow up with them. To say that egg creams are a combination of milk, chocolate syrup and carbonated water is rather like saying that a potato knish is mashed potatoes inside a pastry shell — accurate enough as far as the descriptions go, but badly missing the mystique. Brooklynites argued passionately about who sold the best potato knishes, egg creams, or stuffed derma (those unfamiliar with the last item would be better off not asking) because so much of their sense of self, of "identity," was wrapped around the celebration of foodstuffs and other instances of ethnicity.

None of this would matter if it were not the case that the novels on which Heller's reputation will ultimately rest — *Catch-22* (1961) and *Something Happened* (1974) — are exercises in Jewish erasure. Yossarian, *Catch-22*'s quintessential outsider and lone protesting voice, makes much of the fact that he is Assyrian, while Robert Slocum, a world-class paranoid who feeds on corporate intrigue and domestic grief, is given a decidedly non-Jewish moniker. The scenario is hardly a new one: Arthur Miller made a similar decision with regard to *Death of a Salesman*, underplaying Willie Loman's Jewishness in an effort to make the play as "American" as possible, and the renewed controversy about "The Diary of Anne Frank" has once again pitted the case for Jewish particularity against what some regard as the wider, less sectarian reach of the universal.

Heller is an instance of the debate writ small. As Gold struggles (unsuccessfully) to put his disparate thoughts about the Jewish experience in America into paragraphs, he soon realizes — along with Heller himself — that he can't quite beat back the rhythms and wisecracks of his Coney Island upbringing. The larger world may have been going through convulsions that drastically altered what it meant to be Jewish in the twentieth century, but little Joey Heller remained essentially innocent:

I did not really know who Hitler was. Our elders did, but I doubt that even they, or anyone, could have guessed at the evil immensity of brutal destruction he was going to loose. I remember a day: It is late afternoon, and I can hear again the newspaper vendors tearing through our street with their high-pitched cries and their "extra" editions of the papers with glaring headlines announcing that Hindenburg had resigned as chancellor. They knew they would sell every copy that day, whereas I didn't know who Hindenburg was. Until much later, I thought he was a zeppelin.

That Heller may not have given much attention to Judaism as a child, as a teenager, or as a young adult — after all, the "Jewish experience" was all around him, as natural and omnipresent as the very air he breathed — but certain of its earmarks and effects were there nonetheless; they suffused the attitude postures he brought to experience, albeit with decided differences. For example, Heller's mother insisted that he say *kaddish* (the prayer for the dead) during the Yizkor portion of the High Holiday services. What prompted her maternal command, however, tells us more about decorum as defined in Coney Island neighborhoods than about religious conviction:

Because we tried to see ourselves as others might see us, we tended to be a self-conscious bunch. A household anecdote epitomizing that point related to the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. My mother, who in general was nonobservant, preferred that I go to one of the two synagogues of our street late in the afternoon to say the Kaddish for my dead father, more, I'd guess, from a belief that a prayer from me would be of much help to either my father or the Lord.

If Heller tended to feel that religious Jews were an embarrassment, ultra-Orthodox ones raised the ante considerably. Musing about the racial troubles that regularly erupt in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where Hasidic Jews live in close proximity to blacks, Heller offers us this commentary:

When Lee married, he and Pearl lived first in an area called Crown Heights. With my mother and sister I visited there several times but have only a nebulous idea of its location. I do know, from the newspapers, that Crown Heights at present is home to a large black community and a large Hasidic Jewish community, who live side by side antagonistically. Certainly, my worries about these two communities would be different, but one group would be no less intimidating to me than the other.

As Gold puts it, in ways that speak as well for Heller: "When I grew up in Coney Island, everyone knew I was Jewish. I never realized I was Jewish until I was practically grown up."

In roughly the same way that Heller cannot remember any "Negroes" when he was growing up — there were no blacks in his elementary school, none in his high school, "not even on the football or basketball teams" — one could argue that he didn't encounter many observant Jews either. As for Jewish Communists, they, too, got a deaf ear from Heller's family:

We did not want what we could not hope to have, and we were not made bitter or envious by knowing of people who had much more. The occasional neighborhood Communist proselytizer got nowhere with us. Neither, I must record, did the dedicated anti-Communist ideologue, not then or later. We worked at what we could because we never doubted we had to work, and we felt fortunate indeed that we could find work.

For all of Heller's satiric irreverence, his books tend to be expressions of an exasperated morality — comic blows, if you will, against everything that cheapens life and ultimately kills it. Certainly one could argue that Jewishness, even if it was absorbed by osmosis rather than sustained contact, plays a significant role in the arithmetic of Heller's uncompromisingly moral vision; but, interestingly enough, he does not indict God (as is the case in more authentically Jewish visions), but, rather, those who construct self-serving "realities" and then foist them upon others.

We tend to think of Heller as a gadfly and often as a rebel, but the portrait of Joey Heller that emerges from the pages of *Then and Now* suggests otherwise:

I confess that I loved school, loved both grade school and high school. I loved the vacations and the end of vacations. The thought of playing hookey in grade school hardly crossed my mind — I wouldn't have been able to think of a more enjoyable way to spend the time. On days when I was absent with a fever, I would watch the clock until Irving Kaiser from the apartment downstairs and Ira Lopata across the street were due to get home in order to converse with them from my window. Twice in high school I was a truant. I calculated with remorse afterward that I hadn't had as good a time at the stage show and film at New York's Paramount Theater or in Weepy's poolroom as I would have had in the classes, cafeteria, and sweetshop at Lincoln. I had no pleasure in disobedience for its own sake, and I take none now.

Now and Then is full of testaments to Heller's incipient Horatio Algerism. He worked hard, studied hard, and eventually made good on a combination of good luck and writerly pluck. At the same time, however, if Heller's

rose-colored portrait proves anything, it is that you can take the boy out of Coney Island, but not Coney Island out of the boy. Whether working in a steelyard (in the days before Pearl Harbor) or flying missions over war-torn Italy (including the fateful one that ended in a fellow aviator's death and eventually as *Catch-22*), squeezing the most out of a college education made possible by the GI Bill or dividing his time between writing serious fiction and Madison Avenue copy, what we feel most is the yawning distance between an innocent, more fun-filled "then" and a comparatively crappier *now*. Quoting George Mandel, his boyhood chum and a successful novelist whose "success" predated Heller's: "If a person did have to grow up in a slum (he used that word *slum* for comic exaggeration) he could imagine no better one."

Alfred Kazin likes to tell the story of how he eavesdropped on a woman as she eyeballed a large window display of his 1994 book, *New York Jew* at a mid-town Manhattan book store. "What a disgusting title!" she exclaimed, and then quickly put as much space as she could between the stacks of Kazin's book, the final installment of his autobiographical trilogy, and herself. My hunch is that Kazin chose his in-your-face title quite consciously — both as a way of confronting the negative stereotypes that still cluster around those prominently identified as "New York Jews," and as an indicator of the enormous cultural distance he had traveled since his childhood in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

By contrast, Joseph Heller remains in spirit and sensibility what I call a "Coney Island Jew." What he remembers most vividly about his childhood is not its grinding poverty, his introduction to radical politics, or experiences (positive or negative) of synagogue life, but, rather, the freedom of a largely unfettered boyhood. The sole exception is Heller's account of the sheer terror that swimming out to the buoy could generate. On one occasion, a friend tired, and nearly drowned: "... I don't recall that I ever set out on a swim to the bell buoy after that," and he goes on to write sentences more revealing than most of the nostalgia-laden paragraphs that precede them:

I am walking proof of at least part of Freud's theories of repression, and the domain of the unconscious, and perhaps, in writing this way here and in other things I've published, of denial and sublimation, too.

Today, I wouldn't try that swim for a million dollars, tax-free, although I don't doubt I could make it there and back. It's this haunted imagination that's mine still.

What readers *won't* learn, however, is what Heller thought — or thinks now — about the Holocaust. That he remains obsessed with the Death Question is true enough. That he brings a dark humor to his brooding is even truer. But in a novel centered on World War II, it is curious that Heller could imagine absurd deaths by the hundreds at a time when European Jewry was being consumed by the millions; and more curious that Heller does not raise the matter himself somewhere in *Now and Then's* nearly 260 pages. Instead, he tells us that *Catch-22* collected more than its fair share of dismissive, often downright negative reviews (one wag called it "shouting on paper") and that other writers walked off with the Big Prizes. Decades later, he still tongues these sore teeth.

Somehow, we expected *more* — if not quite "regret" that *Catch-22* papered over serious matters with high energy and dark comedy, then at least some recognition that the Holocaust is now part of every sensitive person's moral landscape. But such disappointments speak to the autobiography Heller *didn't* write, rather than to the one he did. As his concluding words insist, little Joey Heller is doing quite nicely, thank you very much:

I have much to be pleased with, including myself, and I am. I have wanted to succeed, and I have. I look younger than my years, much younger to people who are young, and I am in reasonably good health.

Serious autobiographies do not usually end on such self-satisfied notes. But acutely conscious of the sand running out of his hourglass, Heller writes a large thank-you note to the "then" of his childhood and the "now" of current situation. Do books like *Closing Time* and *Then and Now* constitute Heller's swan song as a writer? I think not, because writing is what Heller does, and is. If reduplicating the success of *Catch-22* is likely to remain a defining problem, one that engages literary critics far more than it animates Heller, there are good reasons to feel that a disciplined lifetime at the writing desk will produce more books, and generate even more controversy about one of our most important contemporary American writers. □

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LET US PRAY AND WORK FOR PEACE.

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Best wishes for a Healthy
and Happy New Year to
all our Haverim in the
LZA.

Jesse & Frances Bronitsky
Forest Hills, NY

Shana Tova
to our Chaverim in the
United States and in
Israel.

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May the Year 5759 bring out
the greatness of the human
spirit, the triumph of good and
the prevalence of Peace!

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Let the message of Labor Zionism
inspire us to creative action on
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