PINCHAS GOLDHAR

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Australian Jewish writers, by and large, do not fall into recognisable groupings or appear to form strong literary friendships based on shared thematic and stylish concerns. There is in effect little cross-fertilisation. The reason is simple enough. Unlike the American scene, there are just not Jewish writers around to be mentioned in the same breath when comparative studies are embarked upon and, so often, their origins and the influences acting upon them are so widely different from each other in any case.

But there is an exception. Three writers who seemed to fall together in their time were Pinchas Goldhar, Herz Bergner and the younger Judah Waten. Several conections bound them. They were contemporaries and intimately acquainted. Their ages were not too widely disparate: Goldhar was born in 1901, Bergner in 1907, Waten in 1911. All were immigrants: Goldhar from Lodz, Bergner from Galicia, Waten from Odessa, albeit as a young boy. Their politics were decidedly left-wing, perhaps not so acceptable today, but understandable at a time when Soviet Russia in the 30's and 40's was seen as the sole bulwark against the spread of National Socialism in the east where the majority of Jews lived. Moreover, Judah Waten translated Bergner's Between Sky and Sea and other pieces from Yiddish; he was on the editorial committee which published Goldhar's posthumous Gezamlte shriften (Collected Writings) in 1949; and had himself been encouraged by Goldhar to write his reminiscences of childhood in fictional form, the fruit of which was Waten's Alien Son.. And lastly, their literary style, comparable to that of the group of pictorial artists with whom they mingled - the younger Yosl Bergner (Herz Bergner's nephew), Noel Counihan and Vic O'Connor - was that of the social realism, or, as they preferred to call it, social humanism, their themes dealing with the under-privileged in society, or the loners, the dispossessed, the neglected and the outsider. Judah Waten was in time to cast his thematic net more widely - to crime and corruption, and to politics and economic oppression - but his best regarded work is that dealing with immigrant life in Australia.

Pinchas Goldhar , in his work, was a thorough-going pessimist. Born in Lodz, he had served his literary apprenticeship and worked as a jounalist there, rubbing shoulders with the rising lights of Yiddish literature of the time, and, following Markish, Ravitch and Uri Zvi Greenberg, had experimented with various themes and styles.

Coming to Australia in 1928, he traded companionship for loneliness, belonging for alienation, the warmth of "der heym ", of home, for the local hard-edged terrain and the struggle for continuity and survival. For nearly ten years after his arrival, he was, as it were, struck dumb. He worked as a dyer and edited the first weekly Yiddish paper in Melbourne, finally publishing his first story, Oif a Farm (known as The Pioneer ) as late as 1937. His pessimism is already blatant here.

A brief synopsis may serve to indicate its profundity.

In the story, a young man, the embodiment of faith, idealism and upbuilding, seeks, in a way that is reminiscent of Tolstoy and A.D. Gordon, to sink roots into rural soil, in this instance in Australian wilderness as the followers of Tolstoy and Gordon had sought to do the same respectively in Russia and Palestine. His gentle neighbours regard him with astonishment, but it is not they who defeat him. Rather the Jews themselves disappoint and reject him. Being city types, they return in time to the city; whereupon, defeated in his purpose, he turns back to the daughter of an Irish neighbour, she being the only person who understands him and his purpose, but whom he has earlier been prepared to renounce in his pursuit of his cause. And in the final tableau, Goldhar writes:

"They stood hard against one another, their shadows merging into the darkness."

Darkness. This is what Goldhar saw when he looked upon the Jewish reality in his adopted land. Yet, for all that, he called for a display of obstinacy, of standing firm, nowhere more potently than in his still more poignant story, The Last Minyan.

Here, a rabbi travels to a gold-mining town called Wattlehill to lead a congregation. In due course, the gold runs out, the Jews depart. Wattlehill remains without a minyan. The rabbi thus hires one, bringing Jews from an old-aged home nearby. The minyan falls out on strike, demanding more pay. The rabbi is left as good as alone in the empty abandoned prayer-hall, refusing to leave his post, standing firm like the captain of a sinking ship.

Melodramatic? - Maybe. But the point is made. Hold to your principles; cling even in the wilderness to your Jewishness; refuse to break in the face of hostility, indifference, desertion.

And then there are other stories in which the same basic blackness is depicted - in the stories of deaths and funerals in strange soil which represents the final logical culmination of the many disappointments encountered in this golden land; in stories of conflicts between old and new immigrants, between old age and youth.

Goldhar may have had a blind spot in his perception of Australian Jewish society in his day. There were, after all, Jewish institutions in existence, particularly philanthropic ones; and Jewish newspapers and journals were being published; and there was a Yiddish theatre group with a good standard and repertoire. But what was probably irksome was the overall small population of Melbourne, the relative absence of Yiddish readers or of a highly-creative Yiddish circle in a community that was predominantly of Anglo-German origin and not very receptive to East European immigrants from beyond the Oder River.

Goldhar died in 1947, aged 46. He did not live to see the large influx of Jewish refugees into Australia who were to enrich the Jewish community with a plethora of new innovations and institutions. Seeing this, would he have been more optimistic? An impossible question to answer. We can only deal with the facts. And the facts that stand out are that Goldhar's were the first creative works in Yiddish to be published in Australia, his Dertzeilungen fun Australie appearing in 1939; he was the first editor of the first Yiddish newspaper to appear; he was the first Yiddish writer to be included in Australian anthologies, the first to engage in Australian literature at large, translating Australian writers into Yiddish in order to acquaint Jewish readers with the native literature of their adopted country.

A substantial amount of Yiddish writing has emerged since the war, the bulk of it, with few exceptions, in Melbourne and, again with very few exceptions, remaining untranslated and certainly unstudied. Goldhar is one of these; Arnold will speak of Herz Bergner, yet another. To whom we may add Ber Rozen, Mark Lewin, Kalman Sharp, Gedaliah Shaiak, Moshe Ajzenbud and critics and essayists, Yehoshua Rapoport and Yitzhak Kahan.

Perhaps the day will come when Yiddish in Melbourne (or elsewhere in Australia) will revive sufficiently for someone to embark on the task, already long overdue, of reclamation.

It would be a pity if the work begun sixty years ago by Pinchas Goldhar, the acknowledged pioneer of the creative Yiddish word in Australia, should fizzle with not so much a whimper, let alone some lasting memorial in the way any writer would wish most of all: through a book available to all.