**WRITING JEWISH CARLTON**

A talk presented to the Carlton Community History Group - Monday 1 December 2014

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**Introduction**

As an entrée into this talk and reading which I’ve titled “Writing Jewish Carlton”, I should like to make a proposition: namely that Carlton will long remain in the records of a Jewish community having lived here, just as, I would say no less of the Italian community. There are theses, published journal essays, memoirs, accounts of its institutions and, of course, the Carlton cemetery which give substantial evidence of the fact. While, simply mention the name Carlton to anyone who had either a personal or family connection with the suburb and out come the memories, the fondness and the nostalgia that the suburb still evokes: so much so that in just the past four years, two fascinating books have appeared – each a collection of personal accounts which together total ninety-nine in all and span the half-century 1925 to 1975 written by Jews or their children (now adults) who once lived in Carlton or in its immediate vicinity.

There were by then Jews in other parts of Melbourne, too, of course, particularly south of the Yarra, as also in the provinces – in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, for example - who had already arrived much earlier, way back in the 1840s, then throughout the gold-rush period and beyond, and left their own well-recorded mark in a range of communal, civic, commercial, state and, later, federal political affairs: Jews largely from England, Prussia, Austria, Russia and Poland, often come via England.

But Jews in Carlton?…

Most sources appear to set their arrival and settling into Carlton in the main during the interwar years, but, without seeking to quibble over precise dates, other very specific events suggest that Carlton’s Jewry began at least a full century ago.

For if we turn the clock back to 1908, I would ask you to imagine a 46-year old man by the name of Samuel Weissberg, born in Poland, but at this time a cigar-maker and Yiddish actor in London, who came to Melbourne, having been told that there were over ten thousand Jewish families in Melbourne alone and eight thousand more in Sydney and that if he performed in Yiddish theatre here, he would make a fortune. Right away, he was discouraged by a more seasoned Jewish local but he did not despair. To save face back home where he had left his wife until his return, gone to great expense to undertake his journey and travelled by boat some 12,000 miles, he would yet have his theatre. And on asking where he might find a Jewish boarding house of which he had been told, he was directed towards Cardigan Street, where he made himself known as a cigar-maker.

But he was quickly recognised by another person who had seen him perform abroad as the actor that he was. Immediately, the room became crowded, that same evening a theatre committee was formed and, with the following day being Melbourne’s *Chag hasussim*, Hebrew for the festival of horses, or what is today known as Melbourne Cup Day, the committee came together to plan ahead and, two months later, Melbourne’s first performance of a Yiddish play was performed at the Temperance Hall with great success and demands for a repeat – this leading, as more immigrants and actors among them arrived in Melbourne, to the inauguration of a popular, dedicated and much-patronised theatre troupe that endured until the late seventies/early eighties. Although Weissberg himself appears to have remained been involved with the theatre for only a few more years, he remained in Melbourne where he worked by day as a hairdresser at 110 Rathdowne Street, dying at the age of eighty-three.

Move on three years to 1911 when another milestone was set with the creation of the organisation, the *Kadimah* – meaning “Forward” - a social and cultural institution. Located first at the top end of Bourke Street, then, because it needed more space, moving within four years to 313 Drummond Street, it came, in 1933 to settle opposite the Carlton cemetery at 836 Lygon Street - the familiar grey building today known as the Italian Eolian Hall – finally being resettled in Elsternwick in 1968 where it still exists today. After initial disputes whether its operative language should be English or Hebrew, then Yiddish or Hebrew, the issue was resolved when the *Kadimah* became the *Yiddish* Cultural Centre and Library, equipped, as the name itself indicates, with a Yiddish library, a hall seating 400 people and the theatre, becoming also a place for discussions, debates, concerts, recitals and a sustained succession of eminent overseas Yiddish-speaking writers and scholars as speakers.

The inter-War years, and particularly the increasingly threatening 1930s abroad, brought more migrants into Carlton from Poland together with others from post-World War I British Mandate Palestine, many leaving on account of the sheer physical and economic difficulties of life and the mounting conflicts with the Arab population there. The aftermath of World War II saw the influx of yet another wave, by which time an intimate Jewish community had been established to integrate them well, serviced by synagogues, a Hebrew School, a Yiddish printery in Faraday Street, and butchers, bakers, grocers, hairdressers, along with factories and Victoria Market nearby where many had stalls, and more.

Much of this background is now well recorded and readily available, so here I put aside my thimbleful of history and lay Carlton before you from a different angle: Carlton as conveyed by local Jewish through their art, which leads me quickly to home in upon it to its earliest that I have been able to trace in their writings - the 1920s and 1930s.

Although published as late as 1980, the most evocative, near-photographic of these is a short novella *Thousands of Years in the Eyes of a Child* by Yetta Rothberg, born in Carlton in 1919. In it, she describes that stretch of Drummond Street bounded by Elgin and Faraday Streets, which she describes as the first stepping stone in this promising free country, which held many areas of wonder, excitement and terror, especially for the children who lived nearby: a strip where she recalls a haberdashery at the time and a yeast-smelling cake shop, a lolly shop, the Salvation Army Hall, the police station, a factory with four gargoyles, and a lane where rats ran rabidly, shadows fell threateningly and children often played their erotic games. There is here a precision of detail and an intimacy of feeling, in this work which, although written in the third person, reads like a highly personalised memoir of a family playing out its inner dramas in a process of progressive disintegration which, near story's end, leads to a muted bitterness and a haunting question, "What was the purpose of the exercise?"

Having said this, rather than continue to paraphrase her recall of the Carlton she knew, I will let Yetta Rothberg herself tell you:

The time is about the 1920s – she writes.

The setting is Carlton. The broad wide main streets criss-crossed narrow lanes or side streets which cocooned people in their box-like one-sided passaged houses. Rathdowne Street swept up majestically to the Exhibition Gardens, topped by the imperial dome of the Exhibition Building. The gardens, often a long way from home, yet became a centre for young and old. The old folk fed their meagre crumbs to galleon-like swans. Lovers retreated and twisted in the shadows of the grand oaks. Children played wildly or were sick from the smell of the tan of the play area. It was the era of the juggernauting cable tram, the horse and buggy, and the big open Buicks, Studebakers, and the silver stick!

Into this area came a particular type of migrant, from Russia, Poland, often via England, picking up a little of the language en route. They came unheralded, unwelcomed. Often their boldness and motivation were unknown. One heard fragments of their background, childhood dreams, poetry read under a remote tree, stories of village weddings. Unheralded they came, their boldness and optimism often unrecorded.

They brought their families here, they augmented their families in the new environment. Slogged away at their work, maintaining their dignity and love of their religion,. They picked up crumbs of friendship and were accustomed to the barbs of persecution. They carried a strange, noble optimism and dignity in their work, dress and dedication to their own group and to the new land around them. Many of their ideas and dreams they projected on to their children. An extension of themselves, often the latter, suffered from the ambivalence of their own personalities, the expectations demanded of them, and the guilt of failure.

Covering a related period is Jean Holkner, born in 1926 to parents from Palestine, whose *Taking the Chook and Other Traumas of Growing Up* (1987) consists of a series of humorous vignettes in the selfsame streets of Carlton in the 1920s. In contrast to Yetta Rothberg's overall darker narrative portrait, this book is more playful, certainly happier, filled with homely tales of an ordinary Jewish family, laced with anecdotes of her own growing up, of falling in love, living with assorted neighbours around her, her first falling in love and a school ball, a Christmas tree in a Jewish home, taking a live chicken to the local ritual slaughterer in preparation for the Sabbath meal, her attempts while still a school-girl to obtain, and more calamitously, to retain a job, and her other personal traumas of being too tall, of being overweight, of having feet that are too big, in sum, one would say, the traumas simply of being a girl. In a later young person’s novel titled *Aviva Gold* (1992), Holkner tells of another girl’s attempts to deal with her family’s uprootedness from her safe Melbourne home to live in Palestine in 1935 to fulfill her father’s obsession with the Holy Land – one of the very few literary instances where Palestine or, as it later became, Israel, is dealt with at all as a feature in Australian Jewish writing.

In a more sombre mood than Yetta Rothberg’s novella are the works of the Yiddish-language writer, Pinchas Goldhar, after whom Goldhar Place in the heart of Lygon Street opposite the University Café is named. Where both Yetta Rothberg and Jean Holkner were Carlton children from the outset, Pinchas Goldhar came to Australia in 1928 as a 27-year-old from Lodz in Poland, worked here as a dyer and when, after a period of literary silence, he found his voice, he set to writing a succession of stories which were initially gathered together into a collection titled, in its English translation, *Stories of Australia*. His narratives, as they serially address Jewish life, its people’s changing mores, assimilatory trends and drifting away from its core, were almost uniformly gloomy and pessimistic. One of his stories, “Café in Carlton” tells of the owner of a kosher restaurant in Rathdowne Street, which is repeatedly daubed either by a swastika or anti-Semitic scrawls on its door by some local louts, this leading him to recall Berlin where he also had a restaurant, it too having been targeted for assaults during the ever more virulent ascendancy of the Nazi regime. But in the context of the subject at hand, what I prefer to do, as I did with Yetta Rothberg, is to read extracts from *his* word sketch, again like Yetta Rothberg, recording his view of Drummond Street in a piece titled precisely that - "Drummond Street" - in its periods of Jewish rise and flux.

Drummond Street, a poor working-class street close to the centre of the prosperous noisy city of Melbourne, absorbed many Jewish migrants. The houses in Drummond Street are poor and old with rusty, galvanized-iron roofs and peeling walls. From the open doors exudes the smell of sweaty bedding and the odour of poor food. The low windows, covered with cheap, old-fashioned hangings and drab and tattered blinds look blankly but patiently on to silent sidewalks. Drummond Street is empty all day with seldom any passers-by to break the monotony. From the police station which is half obscured by ailing trees there occasionally slides out a dark-uniformed policeman who disappears immediately like a shadow in one of the side streets. At the opposite end of the street is a bar half-clad in polished red tiles.

From here, Goldhar continues to describe a drunkard lurching and staggering upon being spewed out from a pub, an elderly sweating woman peeling green peas and a half-rotten cabbage on her doorstep, expanding on motor-cyclists, housewives with their parcels, children with sweets, tired workers, Italian ice-cream vendors, a Salvation Army band, and so on, ending this section with “So lived Drummond Street for many years; a monotonous, hard-working, beer-swilling, early yet romantic life.”

Following on immediately with:

There was a time when Drummond Street looked different. Many years back, when gold fever gripped the country, adventurers from all over the world stormed to Australia. In those days Drummond Street was a Jewish street. The first Jewish migrants to settle there were from England and Germany, then they were followed by newcomers fro Tsfat and Jerusalem. Nikolaievsky soldiers who deserted from the army escaped here with Jews from Rumania, Hungary, Poland and Galicia. Drummond Street echoed to the sounds of many spoken languages. Jewish shops and small clothing factories were opened. The street was alive. The Jews worked hard, noisily. They and their wives and their children worked and saved penny upon penny. Good times came. The small businesses became large department stores and the little workshops, factories. The Jewish women added flesh and their dark eyes became harder and more tired with success.

Goldhar then proceeds to describe as becoming too constricted, leading its Jews to spread elsewhere, particularly to respectable St Kilda, a suburb of clean villas at then shore of the sea, selling their Carlton homes to Syrian shirt makers and Indian Hawkers, whereupon only a few poor Jewish market stall-holders and old clothes dealers remain. But:

After the war Drummond Street came to life again. After a gap of many years people could again be seen with sad eyes and suffering faces – Jews. They wandered in groups, with searching eyes, down Drummond Street, dressed in new suits from which could be smelled mothballs and on which numerous creases betrayed their fresh unpacking from suitcase. They greet each other with “Shalom Aleichem” [literally “Peace be upon you”], ask about each other’s livelihood and joke about the Golden Country, Australia. From the curtained windows and half-open doors suspicious eyes assess the new arrivals and over Drummond Street can be heard the quiet buzz, “Jews”.

Something of that movement, though far, far briefer, is captured in Harry Marks' *The Heart Is Where the Hurt Is*, published in 1966 by a fifth-generation Australian born in 1922, in which a young Jewish girl whose parents have been captured in Germany by the Nazis, is sent to stay with relatives in Melbourne, there confronting difficulties with schooling, awakening adolescence, anti-Semitism and first love. Marks’ Carlton, however, is a happier place than Goldhar's. For, as he tells it:

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

Having established the setting of Carlton at it was in the ‘twenties and ‘thirties as depicted through these writings, I will change tack and move towards telling more of the kind and lives of people who made their early homes there.

A contemporary of Pinchas Goldhar whose “Drummond Street” I read a few moments ago, was another Yiddish writer, Herz Bergner from an artistic family – amongst them, the artist Yosl Bergner who became prominent in the Social Realist School in the 1930s and 1940s. Born in 1907, Bergner arrived from Poland in 1938 as an already published novelist who, unlike Goldhar, did not wait long, if at all, to continue his writing. His literary forte were novels and short stories, all of which were in Yiddish with two of them translated into English. The first, *Between Sky and Sea*, translated by Judah Waten and published in 1946 and recently republished, was awarded the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society for the best book published that year. It tells of a boatload of Jewish refugees from Europe during WWII seeking and everywhere being refused asylum, only to sink in mid-ocean with total loss of life. [A scenario which we have ourselves in our own time come to know well].

But the work that is more immediately pertinent to our purposes is his *Light and Shadow* of 1963, a novel that tells of a three-generation Jewish migrant family initially settling in a small country town and then moving to 1920s Carlton. In terms of adaptation, the grandparental generation has the worst time of it. They are bewildered by the unfamiliar, they remain bound to the set traditions of their heritage, they are too old to grapple with the challenges of the new. Upon the middle generation – the central figures of the father, Hersh Zeling and his wife, Shaindle - are imposed the comparable tasks of integration into an altogether, to them, alien surrounding Australian milieu without losing their own fundamental identity, of work for economic survival, for personal advancement and, not least, to facilitate the advancement and future security of their own children, the three of them, through education, so strong a desideratum of every Jewish parent. As for the children themselves, before them is progressively laid out a world of attractions and possibilities – amongst others, professional, social and ideological – their choices at times putting them at odds with their parents. So that, while the daughter does the right thing by marrying into the faith, the older son, as the expression goes, “marries out” this carrying with it the consequence of possible assimilation, and the younger one migrates to Israel which has but recently been established. *Light and Shadow* is not, in literary ways, necessarily a great or powerful book. I see it more as being rather formulaic. It is a kind of canvas which seeks to encompass a wide range of themes common to Jewish (and, arguably, to other) migrants such as local adaptation against the pull of ingrained memory and traditions left behind, the necessity to commit oneself, sometimes single-mindedly to work even if it does mean compromising one’s self and one’s religion, such as the breaking of the Sabbath for other ends, and the pull from the front by personal and parental aspirations, and the attractions for the young of the surrounding world leading to the inter-generational conflicts and distancing, intermarriage and assimilation that ensue.

In a very similar vein follows the Judah Waten’s novel *Distant Land*, published a year later in 1964. Born in Odessa in 1911, he lived until 192? in Perth when the family moved on to Melbourne, where he became part of that same intimate social realist literary and artistic milieu which, among others, included Noel Counihan and Vance and Nettie Palmer as well as the Bergners. Like Goldhar and Bergner, he too delved into the adaptive lives of migrants in Australia – his work, however, more broadly, incorporating other ethnicities as well – Italian, Greek, Chinese, German. In his substantial literary output, Carlton receives its chief prominence also in *Season of Youth* and, to a lesser extent, in *So Far, No Further,* but once again, in the context of this talk, it is with *Distant Land* that I wish to deal.

Overall, it covers the same ground as Bergner’s *Light and Shadow*: in this instance, a couple’s migrating from Poland also in the twenties, attaining material success, and their subsequent well-established three children each going their own way, in its later parts telling further of the wartime horrors that befell European Jewry and the creation of the State of Israel. Here, Joshua Kuperschmidt – later become Cooper – is an idealist, a man who aspires to learn languages so that he may be able to bring people together through mutual understanding. Through this, he sees himself as becoming not less of a Jew, but rather more a Jew, a man who respects all mankind, loves justice and trusts in intellect. It is his wife, Shoshanah – a common trait in Waten’s writings where the woman tends to be the dominant person in his families – who is the more practical and materialistic but, at the same time, the devoted and loving go-getting wife and mother, the family eventually reaching their wished-for status and security. Of the children, the eldest who is on his way towards a law career enters his father-in-law’s business and become a narrow-minded self-righteous member of the Jewish Establishment; the daughter, like her mother, is her cancer-research husband’s dedicated support and guide; while, here, it is the younger son who marries a non-Jewish girl. As for Joshua himself, living alone at the end, with Shoshanah having died and the children left the coop, he comes no longer to value his past ideals which have receded into the ether, having spent them in attempting to realise them through his children.

We come next, a generation on, to Morris Lurie, who passed away just six weeks ago at the age of seventy-five. Lurie was born and raised in Carlton, but, despite his having been a much-travelled writer who conveys well the places where he or his characters have lived or which they have passed through, I have been hard-put to locate any of his novels and collections of stories that are very overtly set in Carlton, although I must confess that I have not read every story that he ever wrote. But not all is lost, because he did also leave an autobiography, titled *Whole Life*, although he was then, in 1987, only forty-eight.

And in it, he wrote the following:

Let’s start with the houses.

The first house I remember was very small. Tiny. Bijou. Petit. Semi-detached. A maisonette. One of a pair. Built I don’t now exactly when but I think in the thirties, when there was a vogue for such things, and certainly there was an echo of Art Deco in its stucco and brick. The window box. The tiny front porch. The way the bricks on the façade drew a decorative straight line. There was just that touch of fanciness, albeit on the smallest scale. Those twin brick maisonettes were the only ones of their kind in the street, everything else was older, earlier, and so, despite its tiny size, our house always felt to me somehow better than everyone else’s, special….

The pattern of our house was a dark passage that ran from the front door straight down to the dining room, on the way passing the front bedroom, where my parents slept, and then the next bedroom, which I shared with my sister, my older-than-me sister, seventeen months, and just before the dining room there was the bathroom with, just outside its door, enough space for my mother to sit there with her sewing-machine and work. Then the dining room. Then the kitchen. In the kitchen, if you turned to the right there was another room, *Zayda’s*, my grandfather’s, my father’s father. Or if you kept going straight you went out the back door to, one side, the lavatory, on the other the laundry, called the wash house, and then the back yard…

…a house, as he continues, cramped and tight, with not a single unused space, where there is, yet, room to make a train in the passage with the dining room chairs, to build forts and garages and houses with his blocks, play with his soldiers, play with his marbles, read his beloved comics, have fights and make plans and sleep and dream.

And so on, these early passages leading into a personal recounting of his life to that point, of which I wrote in a review in *Overland*:

Morris Lurie’s autobiography, *Whole Life*, is a howl. Not the howl of laughter that the reader who sees Lurie as a humorist might expect; but rather a howl of anguish, of agony, of the most exquisite pain that comes from being repeatedly kicked in the guts by almost everyone within kicking reach.

For, in that same house where he has played and dreamed, are gathered the members of his family who had already appeared separately in earlier sometimes savage stories dispersed through his collections: the coarse, boorish, philistine, cuttingly critical father; the hard, bony, irascible, loveless and sadistic grandfather; the cold and curtly dismissive grandmother; and his crabby cantankerous sister; not to mention the family’s wider family and friends insensitive to young Morris as a boy. Only his mother emerges as positive and redeeming in this ménage, she who he describes as the miraculous servant, the housekeeper, the wife and mother who works, slaves, cooks, hosts, sews, keeps a market stall, never borrows, never owes, never wastes, the kind who, as described in *Proverbs* Chapter xxxi, verses 10-31, is an *eshet chayil*, a woman of worth, a woman valued well above rubies.

The salient point is made - a record of rejection, rejection, rejection, coupled with a yearning for acceptance, But, with a certain degree of exorcism having been attained, where, at the beginning of the book he rails, twenty years after their passing, at his family’s dumbness, blindness and unfeeling stupidity, and writes that, had it been of the slightest use, he would “drive to the cemetery where they are buried and piss on their graves”, by the end he does offer a hint of understanding, pity and grieving for their very dumbness, blindness and unfeeling stupidity, and in a tentative way, even if in his fantasy, he himself alights upon a comparable hint of acceptance.

Where, with Lurie, I have been talking about the 1940s and early ‘fifties, by moving on to another former Carltonite in Lily Brett, who was born in Germany in 1946 and came to Australia with her parents two years later, we enter the 1950s and beyond. For the record, Brett has for many years now lived in New York. As with Morris Lurie, for all her novels and poetry, apart from an isolated poem and the “feel” of a Carlton-like backdrop to her material, I have found it difficult to gain a specific physically identifiable location in which to set her work. But I must in fairness also confess there that I am no authority on her work, and of that which I have read I have found her ubiquitous dual preoccupations with the Holocaust and with her alter egos personally too onerous.

So I turn to her younger sister by four years, Doris Brett, she having been born in Melbourne and become a writer too, alongside being a practicing psychologist. In a brief autobiographical piece she wrote for one of the two collections of Carlton memoirs that I mentioned earlier on, we learn that the family lived for some ten, eleven years or so in a Nicholson Street two-bedroom workers’ cottage in a neighbourhood of fellow migrants – fellow survivor Jews, and Greeks and Italians - before the family moved to Elwood. What comes immediately to the fore, however, are not these brick-and-mortar facts, but, from literally the very first word with which Doris Brett opens her memoir, a sense of *freedom* whenever she thinks of Carlton: the freedom of her parents who had each lived through concentration camps during the Holocaust, survived and met “miraculously” after then war, and, who, on arriving in Australia were determined to acclimatise here. Meanwhile, coupled with this, Doris Brett stresses her own uncomplicated freedom of childhood with friends around the streets and laneways of Carlton, the absence of local anti-Semitism, the family’s wonderfully maternal Gentile neighbour and her attendance at Lee Street State School which he adored for its young and enthusiastic teachers, one of them having been the presently much-esteemed writer Gerald Murnane. Whatever difficulties she came to have intruded into her later life and fall well outside this particular narrative.

Proceeding therefore into Arnold Zable’s domain, his *Scraps of Heaven* is Carlton through and through. Born in Wellington in 1948 to parents from Poland, he came to Carlton with them while still an infant. His father was a delightful, gentle, quietly-spoken and humble man who wrote poetry that was intermittently published in the local Yiddish press, while one of Arnold’s two brothers is an artist. Literature, Yiddish language, folklore and learning were in the family’s blood, out of which, I have not the slightest doubt, came Arnold Zable’s own flair for story-telling. And his *Scraps of Heaven* – like its companions, *Jewels and Ashes*, *The Fig Tree*, *Café* *Scheherazade, Sea of Many Returns* – is full of stories, stories that unfold in tandem with Zable’s main protagonist Josh’s own successive ventures in streets fully familiar to us such as Lygon, Drummond, Rathdowne, this familiarity enhanced by constants like the Kent Hotel, the palms of Curtain Square and the local tram, and stories, too, of real people with their own given names, some of whom I have personally known, immigrants too, in the main, Jews and Italians alike, living here with tortured memories of lost homelands, past families and anchorage, mingled here with actors, market stall-keepers, machinists and drifters, some of them still searching even as they go about their lives in the present.

Having found it impossible to isolate one extract from the numerous tales to be had throughout this novel, I have elected to do the simplest thing: to offer you a taste of the experiences, the imagery, the flow of the prose which traverses it as a whole – a simple scene possibly still familiar to some of you from years past as it certainly is to me, even though I was then living in nearby Northcote.

Late at night, weaving in and out of his dreams, comes the neighing of a horse, the metallic clip-clop of hooves, the rattling and tinkling of bottles, the quick rhythmic steps of a man on the run, interrupted by the creaking of the front gate flung wide open; and from his half-sleep Josh can hear him, the milkman, deposit the half-dozen or so bottles by the front door. It is a comforting sound, a familiar sound. It has about it a sense of orderliness and regularity. It emanates goodwill and seems to whisper: All is well in the world. While you sleep, little children, you are being looked after.

Josh has never seen the face of the milkman. He remains a creature of the night, of the pre-dawn hours. All he knows of him is the sound of his deliveries, the footsteps, the final swing of the gate shut as he retreats, on the run, back to the milk cart. Then, like phantoms, the horses move on, the neighing subsides, the jingling vanishes into the distance. And there, in the morning, as if to prove it was not merely a dream, stand the bottles, gleaming white, arranged by the doormat, twinkling with dew, while on the road lies a tail of horse manure.

Ah! For Romek Swerdlow, Josh’s father, this is gold. He rolls up his sleeve, shoves the manure into a bucket and carries it on the run, through the house, to the backyard, where he spreads it over his vegetable patch under an early morning sun.

For my own part, I came to the Carlton scene both early and late. As an eight-year-old arriving in Australia in 1951, my trek to Carlton was in a roundabout way. I personally never lived there although I did have Carlton friends as did my parents, whom we would visit, and where we would attend a Yiddish play, a friend’s celebration or some commemoration at the *Kadimah*. My own journey, together with my parents, in Australia began for a brief time in Coburg, continued through Northcote, as described in my story "Two Years in Exile", and, after two years, proceeded precisely to the St Kilda to which I referred earlier in the extract from Harry Marks.

When I reconnected with Carlton, more specifically with North Carlton, and this time, more solidly, was forty years ago, in 1974, where, as a general practitioner there and in neighbouring Brunswick until my retirement last year, I came, as it were, to preside over the moving on of most of the last of its Jewish Mohicans across the Yarra, or to the St Kilda Road Montefiore Homes for the Aged, or, in the way of all flesh, to their final resting-place in Fawkner or Springvale. With many of them having in large part been of my parents' vintage, migrants like ourselves with comparable European backgrounds who had passed through wartime experiences of their own, they were people whose lives and concerns I could well understand. It was natural, therefore, that when I continued to evolve my own narrative voice and thematic matter, they and their children, my peers, became in composite – but very rarely in recognisable - ways springboards for my fiction, which, at my latest count, consists of some sixteen individual stories set in Carlton – ten of them in my last collection, *Where I Stand*, and the remainder strewn through my other books.

To offer you a taste of one of my own narrative snapshots of Carlton I have selected a story titled “Plaques” from my first collection *On Firmer Shores* which I will here précis and illustrate with brief excerpts.

The setting is my former practice at 992 Lygon Street, North Carlton, next door to the Greek Orthodox Church that is itself adjacent to Hughes Street, just short of Pigdon Street.

It happens that a patient turns up for his regular blood pressure check. About this man, Joseph Silber, the doctor-narrator writes:

P. 34: “Vanity about his body…- > pink gaps between them.”

This Silber tells the narrator that they won’t be seeing each other for a while.

When the doctor shows some curiosity, he explains that he will be flying to Sydney to meet his son.

“Yes,” he says, “I have a son. And unless he has moved to Israel or America or wanders about in Gehenna for his father’s sins, he lives in Sydney.”

Upon which, with the doctor having measured his blood pressure, he opens out more upon his past: his arrival in Australia in 1935 as a young man of thirty-one, his having lived there in the heart of “our local Jerusalem” in North Carlton, “this ghetto away from the Old Home”, his having worked in a shirt factory in Flinders Lane and, in time, his becoming a local personality as a ham-actor in charity performances and pantomimes at the *Kadimah*, a “spare echoing hall with a dingy stage and drab fraying curtains”, where he recited feuilletons and told jokes as old as Methuselah but which were “very popular if only because it was music to many ears to hear the mother tongue on alien soil. It was all sublimely amateurish, but in a desert, even water is the sweetest of wines”, to which he adds soon after, “And, after a performance, if a young woman had come alone, I would escort her home and drink coffee with her and if she was modern and not too set upon virtue, I would stay and warm myself between the sheets.”

One such woman is a Sonia Finkelstein, the pianist who accompanies the performances, and, who, after one such dallying, makes of him a father-to-be. She declines an abortion for which he is prepared to pay, whereupon he runs the other way, doesn’t turn up for performances, doesn’t answer her letters, leaves his work, vanishes from public sight, learning only through rumour that Sonia has had a son.

Silber now wants to make amends. Meanwhile, he has established a large factory of his own, has become wealthy and a public benefactor rewarded by numerous letters of thanks and by having plaques with his name hung up in dozens of places.

“And now?” he sys. “With my money, with my gilded cheques, I have bought myself a measure of renown… But what is it all to me? What are plaques if not little tombstones of wood and bronze, dead things themselves, petty monuments to vanity and to an insignificant man’s grasping after immortality?”

Now is the time to right wrongs, to be forgiven. Sonia may still benefit from his money, while, for the many thousands that his son will receive, he should not be too harsh.

And having told the doctor his story, he leaves, saying, “Now tell me, doctor, what’s my blood pressure? Am I about to have a stroke?”

So, Silber leaves for Sydney and returns to visit the doctor six months later. He has changed. His movements are more nervous and jerky. His flesh is flabbier, more pale, it shows features of aging decay.

In Sydney – as he now tells the doctor who is curious about how he fared – he has eventually located her. She has remained unmarried and he traces her to a Heroes and Martyrs’ Commemoration to be held at Sydney’s Town Hall where she is, here, too, billed to be an accompanist to songs sung at such events. He attends the commemoration and at its end, he approaches her. Sonia has become fat, her hair is coarse and grey, she wears clothes that have seen far better times. At first, she doesn’t recognize him.

“Miss Finkelstein?” he ventures.

“Yes?”

“Sonia…”

“Yes?” she asks again, more severely.

“You remember?”

“So?”

They begin to follow the last audience stragglers to the exit.

“How is the family?”

“The family?”

“Your son… Our son. And his children. Our… Our grandchildren.”

Sonia’s responses are spare, they are curt. Her son works, he manages. At the hospital. And when he asks where he can find him, she asks, “You want to *see* him?” And when he has given her his address, without much ado, she says, “I’ll call for you at two-thirty tomorrow.”

So arranged, so done. And the next day, as they drive to the hospital, he can’t refrain from telling her how he’s “made it” in the world, and of his factories, his exports, his properties and his standing in the community. They soon reach their destination, an unprepossessing old and squalid building with winding rusted fire-escapes and flaking pipes reaching upwards along the dull red façade which shows numerous cracks and strains in its monotonous lattice of brick. And when Silber sees it, he thinks what a tribute it is to his son that he has chosen to work with people in conditions as poor as these. On the second floor, Sonia leads him to a workshop smelling of paint, leather and glue where patients sit behind benches, looms, lathes and boxes, punching holes in felt, sorting beads, hammering, weaving, gluing and so on, as a young good-looking man flits from one to another helping each on his circuit.

As the man approaches, Silber feels his pulse throb.

“Ah, Mrs. Finkelstein,” he says.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Simpson.”

Together, Silber and Sonia walk up to a big tall and obese man with a protruding tongue and thick lips bent over a lathe. Sonia draws him towards Silber.

“Albert,” she says, “ she says, “shake hands with your father.”

On hearing this, he is sure that he also hears laughter nearby, even though all around him remain busily quiet. And, on leaving fifteen minutes later, with razors in her voice, Sonia asks Silber, “Did you expect a genius for a son?” And as they return to Sonia’s car, he questions her why she didn’t tell him and tells her how with his money he could have helped, while, outside his hotel, he hands her a cheque towards Albert’s keep. This, she throws back in his face. And as final plea, on stepping out, he appeals, Sonia, will you come with me? We can look after Albert together. We can still make something of our lives. The three of us…”

Sonia pumps the accelerator.

“But you are already married, no? Your money, your factory, your property, your reputation, your… your vanity. Why do you want a washed-out rag?”… “Maybe in the next life.”

Later, he gives the cheque to the hospital. In due course, a plaque is nailed up bearing his name.

Then, having told his story, he straightens in his chair and laughs, with wrinkles cutting deep into his face.

“Well, doctor, what’s my blood pressure?” he says. “Am I going to have a stroke?”

So has my Cook’s tour of Writing Jewish Carlton come to an end. And I close with an admirable line that I came across some time ago, a lovely remark made by American writer, Jamaica Kincaid:

"Large events operate within a single person."

To which I would add: “And they also operate within a single place.”

In the near-hundred year narrative that I have just laid out before you, one such place has been this very Carlton.

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