THIS CRAZY THING A LIFE: AUSTRALIAN JEWISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Richard Freadman. Crawley, Western Australia, University of Western Australia Press, 2007, 301pp.

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In fairness to the reader, I must declare a direct personal interest and involvement in the book under review. On the strength of my *Bibliography of Australian Judaica*, the aim of which has been to include all material of substance written by or about Jews in Australia, I served as one "port of call" among others in providing information about titles and other materials that Professor Richard Freadman required for his project on Australian Jewish autobiography.

As a prelude to this review, it is also appropriate to declare that Professor Freadman's *This Crazy Thing a Life* is an Australian history-making literary and scholarly work, a point to which I shall return later.

But first, it merits reflecting upon, and arguably celebrating the fact that the past 25-30_years have seen an exponential increase in autobiographical writings by Australian Jews relative_to the entire two hundred years since their initial arrival as convicts with the First Fleet in 1788. These include autobiographies by politicians and political activists, businessmen and communal leaders, artists, writers and composers, and, most recently and substantially, by Holocaust survivors and their relatives, and other post-war immigrants. The greatest weight given by Professor Freadman in his book is to Holocaust-related texts which constitutes the bulk of some 300 published full-length autobiographies and 400 shorter pieces that have appeared in assorted anthologies and journals. The numbers alone impress on account of the industriousness of Jewish autobiographers. But impressive too is Professor Freadman's command not only of this voluminous first-hand material, but also of numerous additional secondary sources encompassing Australian Jewry, literary criticism, social theory, psychological theory and bio/autobiographical writing outside the specifically Jewish.

In structure *This Crazy Thing a Life* is a triptych. The first part deals with some major issues that attend the writing of Jewish autobiography. The second contains essays that focus upon seven specific Australian Jewish writers to which is added a separate essay on Melbourne's Makor Library's "Write your Story" initiative. The third consists of extracts selected from a goodly number of the works that have passed through Freadman's hands.

The opening section is an extensive discussion of Australian Jewish autobiographical writing set against the background of Australian Jewish history, population growth and the demographic, cultural, ideological, religious, organisational and political changes that almost wholesale transformed the community's pre-WWII predominantly Anglo-Saxon Jewish life through the post-war influx of Eastern and Central European Jews, many of them as refugees. These migrations, attended by loss of home and family, of uprootedness, transplantation, stateless wandering and refugee status in an alien land gave rise to concerns about how to live in this unfamiliar diaspora, an issue rendered all the more acute by ambivalences and inner conflict with respect to questions of personal *aliyah* upon the establishment of the Jewish State in 1948.

Living in the diaspora has proved for many to be a complicated dilemma. The concept of diaspora has been subject to diverse definitions, some seeing it as an objective condition and others as subjective states of being. Freadman follows leading diaspora scholar Robin Cohen, author of *Global Diasporas: An introduction*, by defining diaspora in terms of commonly occurring characteristics, such as – among others - the dispersal from one's homeland, a residual collective memory and myth about that homeland, an idealization of the supposed ancestral home and a troubled relationship with host societies. He then discusses the Australian Jewish diaspora in the light of this definition, highlighting particularly salient aspects of its own: for example, the dynamics of change and transformation within Australian Jewry and its conflicting attitudes to the 'homeland' that is Israel. Like many other authors referred to, he wrestles with that intractable long-debated issue, "What is Jewishness?", "What is Australian Jewish autobiography?" and where, if anywhere, is the dividing line between Australian Jews and Jewish Australians, when these are in large part defined by where individual Jews locate themselves along a spectrum from being resolutely Jewish at the one end grading through accommodation, adaptation, integration, acculturation to marginalisation, assimilation or even hostility at the other.

Having told of the major changes that have taken place in Australian Jewish life and self-identification, Freadman proceeds to the core of his subject which he introduces via a quotation from Elie Wiesel: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony."

A number of contemporary literary critics, armed with a jargon in which terms like postmodernism and deconstructionism rank high, have turned their attention to this literature of testimony and begun to question the capacity of memory and language to accurately narrate the past – a position which, when taken to the extreme, has given balm to Holocaust deniers. To the general reader, this new criticism raises complex literary and philosophical issues. Professor Freadman, while being no less scholarly than the postmodernists, deals with theoretical issues with a lighter, clarifying, more accessible hand, vigorously taking up arms against those theoreticians' views, himself engaging with the testimonial texts with what he calls a humanist and empirical approach as a commentator, elucidator, guide and companion to help his readers to see more deeply into the works he discusses.

What is true of the whole book is particularly evident in its second part in his analyses of the works of Jacob Rosenberg, David Martin, Andrew Riemer, Susan Varga, Mark Baker, the Brett sisters, Doris and Lily, and Arnold Zable, through which he explores, among other themes, the diverse aspects of trauma and recall, of imagination and craft, biblical and secular connections, multicultural issues, one-time gods that have failed (both religious and political), complex family relationships and degrees of connectedness with things Jewish.

Of these, Rosenberg is the sole memoirist who has experienced the horrors of concentration camp life, he is also the most immersed in Jewish biblical, cultural, folkloric imagination and ideology – in his case, Bundist - having grown up and matured with all these well before the onset of war, this legacy giving to his two major autobiographical works

to-date, *East of Time* and *Sunrise West*, poetic qualities and dimensions that "pierce the darkest dark with a sliver of light."

Where Rosenberg was at a later time to become versed in secular culture as well, it is clear that Jewishness lay always at the core of his being. In contrast, David Martin, born Ludwig Detsinyi into a Hungarian family, needed a Hitler "to bring home to him… the parlousness, the inescapable historicity, the enormity of the Jewish fate", as Freadman puts it. True, he had lived in pre-War Palestine; but this former communist who believed passionately in new forms of social inclusiveness, rejected Judaism as a form of "tribalism", "tribalism" being in his view "the curse of the species" and a major factor in genocide. While Professor Freadman characterizes Martin's autobiography *My Strange Friend*" as "anguished", he describes Andrew Riemer's autobiographical oeuvre as "deracinated". Also Hungarian, Riemer came from a family of highly-assimilated, non-practising, bourgeois Jews. Having arrived in Australia at the age of ten, he writes that he has since dwelled in "a no-man's land between the alien and the accepted". However, this comment reflects his experience as a migrant rather than his condition as a Jew. Indeed, despite his own family's brush with the Holocaust, Riemer does not accord much importance to his Jewish identity, and can even seem dismissive on this issue. In *Inside Outside* he writes that "It would serve little purpose to recount the tale of our survival" – a position that runs contrary to Rosenberg's saturation with his Jewish past.

Whilst Jacob Rosenberg, David Martin and Andrew Riemer lived through the Holocaust, most of Freadman's other selected writers – Mark Baker, the Bretts and Arnold Zable – have in one sense written proxies. They are in effect commentator amanuenses who have gained knowledge of it from the stories and/or interrogations of their survivor parents, from visits either alone or with their parents to the camps decades after the events recounted, and from other sources. The factual details of their parents' experiences aside, these writings are compounded by elements absent from the first generation survivor accounts: issues of inter-generational dynamics, for instance, as told by Baker, and, particularly strikingly, the alienated Brett sisters, who so differ in their respective accounts of happenings and personalities within their own immediate family; the dilemma of being torn, as Freadman writes of Zable's *Jewels and Ashes*, "between the desire to respect and observe the privacy, the silence of the survivor parent, and the 'urge to penetrate' the parents' 'inner world'". Another variant is the child survivor narrative, as evidenced by Susan Varga's *Heddy and Me*, which interweaves Holocaust narrative and the story of an evolving mother-daughter relationship. After a return visit to Hungary with her mother, Heddy, to Hungary, Susan attends a conference of child survivors. She writes of going to the conference "as a member of the second generation [and coming] home as a member of the first". The book concludes: "We have things in common, Heddy and I". Freadman often focuses on ethical issues in Holocaust narrative. He expresses concern, for instance, at the artistic licence that prevails in Lily Brett's autobiographical narratives which, whilst containing some fine things, too often exhibit a "bizarre amalgam of sex and Holocaust". Freadman sees here "limitations [which] are at once artistic, psychological and ethical". Freadman's readings also constantly consider these autobiographical works as literary texts with striking and sometimes innovative artistic

characteristics. Thus in his *The Fiftieth Gate*, Mark Baker eschews the realist techniques that characterise most Australian Jewish autobiographies in favour of what Freadman terms "modernist narrative experimentation: not just poetry, but inventive techniques of narrative juxtaposition and transition, interleaved historical documents, innovative engagements with sociological generalisations about survivors and the experience of children."

As mentioned, this section contains a separate essay on Melbourne's Makor Library "Write your Story" project, a program to which he pays much-deserved credit for the encouragement, guidance and assistance given by instructors and editors to those writing their memoirs. Whilst most of the Makor authors are Holocaust survivors or family members, some are not. Freadman pays tribute to the scope of the project, its representation of Australian Jewish lives in general, as well as to its special part in saving survivor testimonies from oblivion.

The last part of the book, totalling seventy-seven pages, is an assemblage of extracts from the memoirs of sixty-six writers telling of life as it was in the "Old World", of survival through the Holocaust in the camps, ghettos, forests, partisan groups and in hiding, followed by accounts of living in stateless limbo, of migration, and of settlement in Australia. Some of these passages also touch upon relations between the generations, the memoirists' sense of belonging and of "making it". Others report continuing specifically Jewish experiences: wariness and insecurity; degrees of Jewish communal attachment and observance; still others deal with matters relating to gender, careers, outlooks and ideology.

As voluminous as the biographical/ autobiographical output centred upon the Holocaust may already be, there is even now, on nearing sixty-five years since war's end, little indication of any significant abating of such writing. With Australia reputedly containing, outside Israel, the greatest number of Holocaust survivors, the call to remember and record continues, with the task, coupled with the effects upon themselves of growing up in survivor families being assumed also by their children, while evidence gleaned from university curricula, scholarly conferences and literary festivals points to a sustained engagement with the Holocaust by "the third generation" as well. If there is a downside to this, one could argue that such pervasive holocaust consciousness in the Jewish community and proliferation of academic holocaust studies on campuses nation-wide are claiming too many bright and talented young people who might otherwise direct their gifts to other aspects of under-taught Jewish learning, Jewish creativity and other communal cultural, social and organisational needs.

However, one may argue against the complex and presently-unchangeable reality of things but no argument will change it; one illustration of this being that, while the sheer volume of this growing testimony may in time risk a supersaturation of the field beyond the mastery of individual scholars and laymen alike, nonetheless such (often driven) personal evidencing of survivors' past will continue well into the foreseeable future, with each book or essay individualising actual concrete experiences headed by a name and a face of its own, fated otherwise to be lost in the anomie of the collective mass – as a tombstone is to a mass grave. On another level, cathartic as such a release of memory may be, each resulting work – as well as being one more concrete counter to Holocaust deniers - is also one more piece

contributing to a far larger picture, vital to historians, sociologists, demographers and biographers among others, telling of personal and daily life in one's one-time central or eastern European home, of wartime endurances, killings *en masse* and families lost, of life as stateless refugees and then as migrants in Australia, and of adaptation, acculturation and "making it" in the new alien land – these latter elements carrying within them ripe seeds for an already emerging solid and accomplished new literature by the second, third and subsequent generations imaginatively exploring and portraying its migrant forebears as did British and American writers and Australia's Yiddish writers earlier in the twentieth century, on turning to their roots.

At the outset of this review, I wrote that this book is a history-making literary and scholarly work. Why so? Several years ago, a very devoutly Catholic Spanish lady, a lecturer in colonial literature at the University of Barcelona, completed a Doctorate of some 400 pages on Australian Jewish literature. Around the same time, a post-graduate student in Canada completed his own equally substantial PhD thesis on post-Holocaust Jewish writing in Canada, Australia and South Africa. In Japan, a professor of English has written essays on Judah Waten and translated his *Alien Son* into Japanese, while, over the years, I have had occasion to correspond with scholars in Italy, New York, Florida and Haifa who have engaged in work on Australian Jewish literature. But here – here in our own front yard! – apart from a pair of essays in the *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal* dating back to the 'seventies and a BA Hons thesis on post-Holocaust writing, there has, to my knowledge, been nothing of any significance or magnitude either taught or written on the subject in its deserving breadth. As compiler of the *Bibliography of Australian Judaica*, I am immediate witness to the volume and scope of output of Australian Jewish writers, artists, historians, biographers, memoirists and scholars across a plethora of fields, all of which goes begging for scholarly engagement. In Professor Freadman's book, Australian scholarship has a worthy first.

Professor Freadman's *This Crazy Thing a Life* is, further, a book not just of this time or for this time. Given its scope and its depth, and complemented by copious end-notes and an extensive bibliography of autobiographies and other sources, it is variously a model, guide and encouragement to others with valuable stories to tell – and who hasn't? Whilst the Holocaust and Holocaust-driven migration form the greater part of *this* book, there are of course many rich stories to come of Jewish life in Australia, both within the Jewish milieu and in its engagement with Australian society - stories laced with issues of adjustment, ambivalence, aspirations, achievements, identification, ideology, perplexities and complexities that Jews in Australia, in common with Jews everywhere, keep confronting daily in their lives.