

The Life That I Have Led

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Fine-Lit

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Also by Serge Liberman
On Firmer Shores (stories)
A Universe of Clowns (stories)
A Bibliography of Australasian Judaica.

To my parents,
to Eva, Dvora, Jonathan and Noemi always,
to all who venture ever to reach deeper, look further and aim higher,
having at the end no reason to regret the life that they have led
or the life they have not led,
as also, with no less feeling, to those who do regret.

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Seeds

Nearly empty, the house. Mere odds and ends remain, earlier necessities become ephemera which we – Mother, Father, I – toss higgledy-piggledy into boxes, into cartons soon to be taken away. The other wares already lie outside, deposited on the nature strip, on the pavement, in Father's station-wagon, themselves to be delivered to charity or to be thrown away at the local tip as junk, all the accumulated now-redundant bric-a-brac of years cluttering Zaida Zerach's home – the usual chipped dust-encrusted peeling picture-frames, old suits with the fustiness of mothballs choked, mottled mirrors, a rickety table, precarious chairs, an outworn sofa with pouting springs, his violin.

His violin. Solace to his solitude, succour to his soul.

Not overly pious, far less observant, yet does Zaida Zerach ever like to talk of souls.

'Do you know,' he says as his fingers sift melodies, wring tremolos from that varnished frame of pinewood and wire, 'there is a *dybbuk* in these strings and a *dybbuk* is a soul and that soul dances like a *shikker* across space across time as tum-ta-tum-tum it leaves one human body to enter another?'

He continues to play.

'*Raisins and Almonds*,' he plays.

'*Margaritkes*,' he plays.

'*The Little Town Belz*,' he plays.

'Not music is this,' he says as strings oscillate and tremble beneath the bow, 'not music, don't be fooled, but the soul of a people through the centuries passing down from Jubal and

King David through me on to you. So open up your soul Raphael mine, open your soul, and let the souls of others of your people continue and live and abide through you on to generations and to generations yet to come that their greatness *our* greatness brilliance light may yet be given unto the nations as was the charge given to our father of fathers Abraham our Father whose seed was to be as the stars of heaven and the sand upon the shore.'

'Three levels of creation define a man,' he says, plucking at strings that resonate on pine. 'What he does what he thinks what he feels. In this a man is deed a man is mind a man is soul.'

Zaida Zerach, if mother I am to believe, is intoxicated with soul.

But his own soul, Zaida Zerach's, where, where is it now to be found?

The rooms, under our tread, reverberate. Our voices, however solemn, however subdued, echo in the expanding camphored emptiness of the house, metal rings against metal, wood clatters on wood. Neither Mother nor Father seems to hear, but Zaida is playing. He stands before the window, as I do now, looks out upon the porch, the street, the terraces and the cottages as their shadows lengthen this side of the sinking sun, and makes the strings hum, the soul that customarily rides on the music not dancing now as on occasions past, but rather easing to rest, tamely, wearily, resigned. Twelve months have witnessed his metamorphosis into a reed; his pancreas has cannibalised his flesh; that which was once colour, fullness, health, is now sallowness, transparency, decay.

'When I die,' he says, 'may my body be cremated and may my ashes be thrown into the wind.'

His eyebrows, as he peers at me, pucker into folds. His are the unslept eyes of one desperate for sleep.

'For one thing, that is what happened to your Zaida Ephraim, your father's father, when Europe was a furnace, a charnel-house, a gas-chamber. And for another, no man with a

navel born belongs to himself alone. Neither during this life, nor after.'

There comes an occasion when Zaida Zerach sees fit to buy me an atlas. I have just completed first form creditably well. He, a man who has journeyed through Poland, Russia, Germany, Italy, France, Egypt and Ceylon entertains the notion to tell me of his travels, to teach me history, geography, current affairs, *life*. Over city, village, wheat-field and steppe, I follow his finger as he traces out his route, moving from one page to another on which he creates, re-creates Siberian frosts, Uzbekistan mosques, the DP camp at Ziegenhain, the Champs-Élysées, the red Suez sands with Bedouin sheltering under palms, pineapple-sellers scaling his ship at Colombo, the spectre of the new land he is approaching becoming form, become reality housed and paved and railed as he nears slowly, slowly, and enters the Port Melbourne docks at the nether tip of far-flung Australia.

Listening to him as he plays out his life at the stage just short of the call to *kaddish*, it is a map of rivers I remember most clearly. They are all there, more in number than in the very world itself, all traversing the beaten terrain of his scalp – rivers, rivulets, tributaries –, their blue not truly blue but violet, purple, inky in a topographic expanse run to austere denuded dessicating tawny waste.

'Before his death and after it,' he says, watching his own fingers at play upon the strings, 'not a wet ugly wretched hole in the ground is his home, but the world itself, the space out there, all of it, in the clouds, in the sunlight, in the mist, the fog, and with the very dust from which the man has been formed; while his soul born into the universe remains forever its citizen, wandering forever and for all time on earth, to touch, to move, to enter into others.'

But Zaida Zerach, asking for that which the law of the Rabbis, the Law, enshrined in *Torah*, *Shulchan Aruch* and *Talmud*, cannot sanction, is brought to his final recumbency and repose in just such a hole, in the wind-lapped surface crust of Springvale, among the tombstones that sprout, monthly,

weekly, daily, like ... like ... like the tomatoes on his porch.

Through the grimy glass of the window I see them, his tomatoes, their stems struggling through the dense grey soil in deep aluminium cylinders, the fruit still green or ripening, or ripened to lush edibility. What gall must have been his from them to be taken, and what chagrin at being so hastily interred, the finality of it so all-annihilating, no rein in the slightest given to his soul that would wish to roam, roam free, whatever the balm flowing from Rabbi Faigen's solacing words delivered before the open grave.

'A Jewish soul has departed,' he says, Rabbi Faigen, the man of God short and young and bearded and visited with a lisp. 'Returned to its Maker that soul, the soul of a man who, like the brothers and sisters of his unhappy generation knew what it was to suffer, to lose family, to be uprooted, for years to wander about the Siberian wastes while Europe burned, for years to struggle, in Russia, Paris, Australia, and yet to endure all with neither harshness on his lips nor hatred in his heart. A *lamed vavnik* was he, a saint among the highest, his memory forever to shine in the hearts of his dear ones.'

The first fat drops of rain fall, yielding a hollow patter against the pine of Zaida's white unvarnished coffin. The gathered mourners draw into themselves. Rabbi Faigen glances upward.

'May his memory shine,' he says. 'His memory. For after all his travails on earth, what else, what else if not memory is left of a man? ...'

He would say more, I swear, but, with the rain swelling, he steps back a pace instead, gives a signal with his brow and with his chin, and with apt solemnity watches as, first, Father, then the socialist printer Levenberg, the fruiterer Norich, his partner Solinski, and Eckstein the tailor-poet shovel wet brown loam into the pit. Mother gasps, sobs, heaves, weeps, as Zaida, in the rain, body-mind-soul Zaida disappears, his friends making him vanish in a mere five minutes of dogged shovelling into a plot of earth twelve thousand miles from the

leaking draught-bitten cottage in Lodz where, a lifetime before, he has been born.

Yet, though neither Mother, nor Father sees him – though, in taking out the chattels of his former home, they pass him by, if once, then a dozen times –, he is kneeling on the porch, with a battered kettle evenly watering the roots of his tomatoes, binding the stalks to uprights with ribbons and twine, touching the leaves, fondling the soil. He wears again his tattered green sweater, wipes his hands in his baggy pants, and strains the buckles of the sandals he wears without socks.

'In the *sovkhos*, there, too, I grew tomatoes when the frosts thawed and let the seed ripen to fruit. Because cold it was. To clean ourselves we rubbed our bodies with snow. Water we pumped up and carried from wells a kilometre, two, three away. And as for *hot* water. Hot water! Who, even in Ziegenhain knew what that was, or up there on the fifth floor in the eighteenth *arrondissement* in Paris, or even here, in this house, Raphael mine, in Carlton, in this paradise that in your atlas is called Australia . . . Even here, my blood, my heir, earthly bearer of my soul, have you ever seen your Zaida use hot water for the pampering of his flesh?'

I shake my head. No; I have never seen Zaida Zerach use hot water for the pampering of his flesh.

'After Europe,' he says, scraping with a knife the clay impacted to solidity beneath his nails, 'a man can in Australia take the very worst. And after that, still worse. Hot water turns the skin to jelly. Dissolves the oils and makes it soft and weak and wrinkled before its time. Just as softness, clover, feather-beds – may no evil eye fall upon the nest-egg your father-mother have here built up – make the soul soft and weak and wrinkled, while for the seed of Abraham with an arduous eternal mission unto the nations charged, no softness can be permitted, nor clover, Raphael mine, nor feather-bed. These only dazzle, where they are the sons of Abraham that must forever be the brightest light; these become the end of all striving, when perfection is the truer end as is also purity of the soul; and the coming of redemption do they thwart, and

the descent of peace most sanctified, and of the glorious and triumphant consummation of our task for which your *zaidas* and *zaidas' zaidas* found the strength yet to cherish breath and to hold to faith, even when their necks were bared beneath the sword, their bodies tied like lambs to the stake, their flesh turned to violet from the poisonous vapours let into the zyk-lon chambers by men whose names might in the service of all best be eternally expunged.'

Carried on crests of resolve billowed by Zaida Zerach's proud capacity to endure, I step under a cold shower in my home, my own home, my tiled and carpeted, wall-papered upholstered immaculate home locked in a cul-de-sac the statelier, leafier, balmier edge of Kew. Under that lashing glacial cataract, my teeth bite lemons; goosepimples clamp my every pore. I gasp, breathe fast, inhale, exhale, hold my breath, and lock my knees and stamp my feet and dig blue nails into my palms. But in the end, I escape, must escape, as, draping towels about my shoulders one, two, three of them, I stand there hunched, contracted, as near to rigor mortis as living will allow, shivering and shuddering like a storm-tossed dog. And if that is a lapse, yet do I lapse again, and yet again - first, when in emulation of Zaida Zerach's mastery over hunger in times to wintry history now relinquished, I pledge myself to starvation rations and to fasting, compelled finally to yield to the griping sleep-depriving cramps of a stomach to emptiness unaccustomed; and further, when, in the glorification of labour such as Zaida Zerach once sweated over, grappled with, and overcame, I dig up a far corner of our garden in preparation for a vegetable patch, only to succumb to the clawing throb and stiffness of biceps, calves and back that make me abandon that plot to weeds, Father saying then, 'Well, so much for our home-grown provider of pumpkin, carrots and beans' and calling in the gardener to lay down lawn once more, my ecstasy, resolve and exertions to extinction thus annihilated, no testimony remaining, no face, no name, no redemption to be salvaged.

Void, then, is testimony to *my* efforts; Zaida Zerach's house to emptiness now stripped, what remains of *him*?

'Have we left anything behind?' Father says from the doorway.

'Nothing else we can give away?' Mother says.

'Nothing,' Father says. 'We can go now. Give the place to the wind till the next people move in.'

I look about. Eerieness consumes the vacuum that has now usurped the room, the house. No more hang there the curtains, or stand the chairs, the second-, third-hand, fourth-hand buffet, the table at which Zaida Zerach over Russian tea and almond bread long ago argued with Becker, Levenberg, Winkler and their wives about socialism, Marx, Pilsudski, Stalin, Israel, the messiah, God. Only smells remain – of mice, naphthalene and mould, and of dankness corroded with grime and walls bronzed and blotched with rust. I wish I could hear again his violin that might at least once more restore a touch, a memory, of warmth, however fleeting, before departing, but coldness, too, and unfamiliarity, have already stolen into every corner. Called by Father, I turn to leave, but catch sight of a slender pile of photographs on the mantel above the fireplace in which, in Zaida's time, no fire ever burned. It is Mother who has found them in the buffet, but diverted by another task, has left them behind, forgotten. I take them now and, looking back no more – all that there has been left to see, I have seen; all that there has been left to hear, I have heard –, I go outside, I go outside into the openness, into spaciousness, into the light, go out there, where there is life both living and lived, where there is also freshness and movement and where there is direction, purpose and marvel, too, and thought, debate and industry.

Out there in the street, I take deep breaths again, rid myself of the mustiness and acerbity that, for decades past, have swathed Zaida Zerach like a shroud, and, given the audacity, might like a rooster crow out my liberation from that house become a tomb.

To my left, on the porch against the wall, are Zaida Zerach's tomatoes. Each time I have visited him, he has plucked one for me, rendering it as an offering with the formula. 'At least you do not forget your Zaida like so many other boys so here take this enjoy it is ripe and rich and juicy suck from its heart its very soul.'

There is another ripe and rich and juicy tomato even at this moment weighing down its stalk. It, too, I now pluck. Zaida Zerach would not mind, I know; even if he were there, not in the least would he mind, I know. But it is not to eat it, to suck from it its soul as Zaida calls it that I sunder it from its source, but rather to toy with it, manipulate it, toss it, polish it, dandle it as I would a ball, this opportunity the last as I say goodbye forever to the home that was for so long my Zaida's. And all this I do; I toy with it, manipulate, polish, dandle it, and toss it, toss it high, toss it once, toss it twice, and a third time, and a fourth, on the fourth seeing it rap the spouting skirting the roof, from there to return more swiftly than my hand beneath is poised to catch it, in that instant, not only the tomato slipping through to strike the ground, there in turn to split and splatter, but all the photographs as well that, in my bungle, I also drop, these dulled greying fraying relics scattering, face up, face down upon the path, Zaida somewhere in Poland with his mother - his father, Zaida in the Urals with Buba Sarah, Zaida outside barracks with his brothers - his sisters, Zaida with his daughters, Mother among them, and Zaida in streets, in stores, in kitchens, and in fields, all different Zaidas and yet the same, not the yellow hallowed Zaida now lying in the clay of Springvale, but other younger, sturdier, darker Zaidas who hewed up soil and grew tomatoes, who dealt in draperies and, on his violin, stirred up music, stirred up souls. My Zaidas all are they, of whom Mother, as if by duty driven she too bends to salvage the photographs so sacrilegiously dispersed, chiding the while, 'Is that how you treat the memory of your Zaida?', and adding more gravely then, 'That after all a man's been through, that this is all that should remain'; and of whom Father, ever the wry one, says, 'Well, there *are* his

tomatoes, that are still over there.' My Zaida, Zaida Zerach all are they who over his violin once said, 'There is a *dybbuk* in these strings and the *dybbuk* is a soul', who said, 'A man is deed a man is mind a man is soul', who said, 'Not music is this but the soul of a people through the centuries passing down from Jubal to King David, from King David on to me and through me then on to you.'

But not in the photographs does he remain, Zaida Zerach, as Mother infers, nor in his tomatoes even if one allows for any seriousness in Father's wry remark, nor even, as Rabbi Faigen at the funeral said, in memory alone is he. How can a man supposedly as learned, reputedly as wise as a rabbi not truly see? – As I gather up the photographs, some of them smeared and stained with the juice so rich, so red of that shattered tomato, I am pulled up to a dizzying halt. As if struck, I stand up. Around me are trees, flowers, cottages, shrubs, plantations, fences, lamp-posts, wires, grass and concrete, common things all, things I have climbed and touched and walked upon and plucked times innumerable, and yet now so acutely, peculiarly, dazzlingly different. It may be the wind skirting about the eaves that animates the vaulting revelation or the mellowing lilac light, or the flush of warmth now come up the spine with pricking prickling nipping teeth, or the suddenly-leaping smells of lavender or lemon rising piquantly and headily from Zaida Zerach's neighbours' gardens. All these – everything about me – are of one unit, all united in a vastness of space that, as I look about, strikes me for the first time as so wholly and awesomely limitless and of which, however solitary I am as I stand on that minuscule infinitesimal spot of soil, I am yet an integral part.

But not even this is what has startled me to near-immobility. Those seeds, those seeds! The seeds of that tomato now pulped and demolished on the path where Zaida Zerach is playing his violin. They may not hear him, Father, Mother, but he is giving life to souls, giving breath to souls, and on those strings that oscillate and tremble beneath the bow, those souls, they dance, those souls they dance, and they dance like

shikkers across space across time, dancing from Jubal and King David down the generations even down to Zaida Zerach and through Zaida Zerach on to me. 'Open your soul Raphael mine,' he is saying, 'open up your soul', and, following his bidding, I open up my soul and through that opening does his own soul enter into me and with his soul, he brings still more, whole hosts of souls, generations of souls, the ever-surviving souls of my people, that through me they may continue that through me they may continue and live and abide and that their greatness, *our* greatness brilliance light may yet be given unto the nations as was the charge given to our father of fathers Abraham our Father whose own seed was to be as the stars of heaven and the sand upon the sea.

Buba Grandmother

dybbuk, a soul transmigrated from the body of one who is dead to that of a living person

Kaddish, recitation of the prayer for the dead.

lamed vavnik, one of the thirty-six righteous men of the world on whose account the world is preserved

shikker drunkard

Shulchan Aruch, literally, a prepared table; a code of Jewish Law

sovkhov, a Russian mechanised farm owned by the state

Talmud, the main authoritative compilation of ancient Jewish law and tradition

Torah, The Pentateuch

Zaida, Grandfather