

PINCHAS GOLDHAR REMEMBERED¹

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Pinchas Goldhar (1901-47) was born in Lodz, Poland and, after graduating from Warsaw University he worked for a Yiddish newspaper in his native city and translated works into Yiddish. In 1926, together with his widowed father, brother, and sister, he migrated to Melbourne, where his father established a business as a dyestuffs merchant in Carlton, Jacob Goldhar & Sons, of which he was a partner. From 1928-31 he became editor of the first Yiddish newspaper in Australia, the *Yiddishe Naies*. Goldhar began to write stories and commentaries in Yiddish and English, and in 1939 published *Stories From Australia*, the second Yiddish book published in this country. He became part of a circle of Progressive writers and intellectuals in Melbourne. The circle included such figures as the artist Yosl Bergner and the author Judah Waten (who later wrote Goldhar's entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*) among local Jews, and non-Jewish leftist intellectuals like Vance and Nettie Palmer, Brian Fitzpatrick, Noel Counihan, and Vic O'Connor. Goldhar died at the age of only 46, of heart disease and diabetes, compounded, it is said, by carrying heavy sacks of dyestuffs around his factory. He was well appreciated in his lifetime, but since his death has achieved an enhanced reputation as probably the foremost Australian Jewish writer of his time.² It is highly appropriate that a new collection of Goldhar's stories, many of which had not previously been translated into English, should now appear.

Shortly before his death, Goldhar paid a visit to Ballarat to meet the Australian-born writer Nathan F. Spielvogel, at the time probably the best known Jewish writer in the country, who maintained a private museum of Jewish artefacts. He was accompanied by Judah Waten and by a Jewish lawyer named Aaronson. After visiting Spielvogel's private museum, Goldhar suddenly disappeared. He later wrote to Aaronson:

I am terribly sorry for giving you so much trouble because of my sudden departure from Ballarat ... The visit to the museum terribly depressed me ... The museum smelt to me with the decay of death. It struck me that Spielvogel personifies our Jewish fate. We are dying out. In Europe we get exterminated

by Hitler, and elsewhere we just dwindle away slowly and painlessly ... Who is going to start Jewish life anew? What I saw in Ballarat is just a miniature of what is going on in Melbourne and Sydney³.

This extract, in a nutshell, presents the viewpoint consistently enunciated by Goldhar in his stories, which might be described as highlighting the double destruction of the Jewish people – in Europe by Hitler, in Australia by the small size of the local Jewish community, its lack of viable Jewish institutions or a Jewish dynamic. What is striking from Goldhar's writings is that he offers no solution of any kind to this grimly pessimistic view of the Jewish situation, either internationally or in Australia. One might, indeed, examine all of the leading Jewish stances of the time which Goldhar did *not* accept. Although he was married in 1934 in the Carlton synagogue, he was not a religious Jew. He was not at that time a Zionist and his stories seldom or never mention Palestine. Even more surprisingly, and despite his association with local radicals, he was not a Marxist, and his stories have nothing whatever to say about 'class exploitation', the class struggle, working-class unity, or the like, and do not praise Stalin or any other left-wing figure. Goldhar was, in all likelihood, a Bundist, a Jewish social democrat, but in a non-ideological way. One point worth noting is that he was a businessman. Jacob Goldhar & Sons was hardly the Myer Emporium – it was a small business, like hundreds of others – but it had to make a profit to survive. Unlike others in his circle, Goldhar was not a lawyer, an academic, or a freelance writer or artist.

Indeed, although Goldhar was part of a circle of progressive intellectuals, it is evident that his stories do not include any of the tropes. It seems clear – to me, at any rate – that Goldhar does not really *like* his non-Jewish neighbours in Carlton, regarding them, it seems, as a gang of alcoholics, gamblers, petty criminals, fraudsters, prostitutes, and general lowlifes, more attractive than the gentile *lumpenproletariat* he knew in Poland only in that they were not grossly antisemitic. Goldhar's story 'The Circumcision' is a full-scale attack on intermarriage. He, in other words, lacked the universalistic humanitarianism of Sholem Aleichem or of others in that strand in Yiddish writing.

Goldhar died tragically young in 1947. Ironically, this was the precise moment when the 'double destruction' visited upon the Jews was to change decisively for the better. In that year, the UN divided the Palestine mandate into Jewish and Arab states; the State of Israel was proclaimed in May

1948, absorbing most Holocaust survivors. In Australia, 1946-47 marked the beginning of the wave of post-war Jewish immigrants to the country, perhaps 30,000 or so in all, totally transforming Jewish life here. Chiefly Yiddish-speaking Holocaust survivors from Poland, who mainly settled in Melbourne, they ended the likelihood of Australian Jewry 'dwindling away slowly and painlessly'. They established the network of Jewish institutions we know today, at a time when, unlike the 1930s, there has been general and continuing prosperity. This change was symbolized in 1968 when the Kadimah itself moved from Carlton to Elsternwick, a more affluent suburb south of the Yarra.

When a great artist or writer dies young, there is always endless speculation as to what he or she might have accomplished or gone onto next. For instance, there has been a great deal of debate over whether George Orwell (Eric Blair), who died in 1950 at the age of only 46, just after writing *1984*, would have become a Thatcherite Conservative if he had lived into the 1980s. The same kind of speculation naturally arises with Pinchas Goldhar, who enjoyed only half a career before his tragic death at the same age, and just at the time when events in the Jewish world, both internationally and in Australia, changed for the better. What would Goldhar have believed if he had also lived into the 1980s? Obviously, it is impossible to answer this question, but it seems very likely to me that he would have moved in the direction of becoming a conservative Zionist rather than remain on the left. Everything in his published works strongly suggests this. He would presumably not have moved to Israel, as his friend Yosl Bergner did in 1950, but he would, it seems to me, have fully accepted the conservative and Zionist consensus that has emerged among Australian Jewry during the past 60 years. Whether he would have fully approved of Israel's policies on the West Bank and Gaza, or of the extraordinary growth of Charedi Judaism, is more debatable, but it seems to me that his stories, written long before, presage such a change in his outlook.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on a talk given by me at the Kadimah in Melbourne on 12 February 2017, at the launch of *The Collected Stories of Pinchas Goldhar: A Pioneer Yiddish Writer in Australia* (Melbourne, Hybrid Publishers, 2016), with a preface by Serge Liberman and an introduction by Pam Maclean. My assessment of Goldhar is somewhat similar to that of Serge Liberman, in his 'Australian Jewish Fiction: A Bibliographical Survey,' in David Brauner and Axel Stahler, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction* (Edinburgh, 2015). I only read Dr Liberman's article after writing my own interpretation of Goldhar.

2. I was first introduced to Pinchas Goldhar by Pam Maclean, who was my colleague at Deakin University for many years. I recall reading Goldhar's story 'A Café in Carlton' in an hotel room in London, and being extremely impressed by it.
3. Cited in H. Brezniak, "Pinchas Goldhar", *The Bridge*, May 1967.