

BOOK REVIEWS

OF BLOOD AND HOPE

by
Samuel Pissar

When Samuel Pissar came to Australia to promote his autobiography "Of Blood and Hope" he made an unforgettable impression on anyone who heard him speak on A.B.C. radio or at the Bnei Brith Lodge.

This man had not only survived the horrors of the most infamous death camp, but after liberation had become an international lawyer in America and adviser to three governments. To follow the development of this man over the years is totally absorbing. But of still greater interest are his views on the situation of the world today. To listen to his advice seems a wise act of self-preservation.

The fact that within a few months half a million copies of the English language edition have been sold and an almost equal number of the French and German version would seem to prove my point.

Born in 1929 in Bialystock, Poland, Samuel Pissar was barely 12 years old when the Russians invaded Poland in 1940. At this age he was very susceptible to propaganda and became an ardent communist.

But with the German advance in 1942 the situation for the Jews deteriorated rapidly. Separated from his family at the age of 13 he had to learn how to fend for himself. Instinctively he understood that in order to survive he had to be tough but submissive towards the prison guards of the various concentration camps to which he was sent. During the four years he spent at Majdanek, Auschwitz, Dachau and Sachsenhausen he learned to anticipate the guards' plans by watching their faces and his ability to make himself useful helped him to survive.

Towards the end of the War, when German industrial manpower had become desperately short, he was transferred to yet another camp near Leonsberg, where, in an underground workshop, he spent months rivetting fuselages for German fighter bombers.

At Germany's military collapse he found himself at camp Kaufering from where, together with his inseparable "buddies", Ben and Nikko, he managed to escape. Running as fast as his emaciated legs would carry him he came upon an American tank and found rescue at last.

At first the temptation to fully enjoy his newly gained liberty was too great. Together with his two friends, Sam engaged in black-marketing, swapping army coffee suds for jewellery or other valuables. He thus landed himself in a German gaol, but regained his freedom with the intercession of a Jewish UNRRA officer.

From this precarious antisocial life he was rescued by an uncle who had emigrated to Australia before the War, and now obtained for him immigration papers to Australia. Ben, his friend from the camps, soon joined him and both youngsters started their high school education somewhat belatedly. After two years they obtained their matriculation.

However, just as Pizar was about to enter university he was struck down with T.B. which had been dormant since his camp days. It meant a year of complete rest and isolation spent mainly in the study of world literature. New vistas opened up as he made himself familiar with the great works of English, German, French and Russian authors.

When cured, he could at least take up his scholarship at Melbourne University. For a long time he had wavered whether to study science or law, but had finally decided on law, for here was a way of involving himself in a discipline where the recognition of human rights was of uppermost importance.

He applied himself to his studies with the same fervour as he had to outwitting the guards of the concentration camp. He graduated brilliantly in 1956. Then fate came to his assistance in the shape of Sir Zelman Cowen, then Dean of the law faculty at Melbourne University. While a guest lecturer at Harvard University, Cowen took up Sam's cause and was instrumental in obtaining for him a scholarship and Carnegie Grant to do a higher degree. It was the supreme challenge for Sam's intellect. Among his classmates were young people who were later to leave their mark on history. There was Henry Kissinger, later U.S. Secretary of State; there was Zbigniew Brzezinski, the future Presidential Security Adviser; there was Ralph Nader, the future consumer advocate; there was Antonio La Pergola, the future justice of Italy's constitutional court; and Sheik Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the future oil minister of Saudi Arabia.

For his doctoral dissertation he had chosen the subject of trade between communist and capitalist countries, which had never been explored before. He was, and still is, convinced that relations between the two super-powers will dominate the future of our planet.

On the basis of his thesis Pizar received an offer of work as a lawyer with UNESCO. He accepted gladly, convinced that in this UNESCO position he could help guide governments on education, science and culture in the newly de-colonised parts of the world.

In 1960 he was called to Washington to join the team of advisers helping to formulate President Kennedy's future policies. The studies he had undertaken at Harvard had all of a sudden acquired political importance.

A short treatise entitled "A New Look at Trade Policy toward the Communist Bloc — The Elements of a Common Strategy for the West" enhanced his reputation. In it he argued that it was absurd that one third of the world's population — Russia, Eastern Europe, China — should have so little contact with the remaining two thirds.

However, to become a conforming civil servant was not for Samuel Pizar. After some soul-searching he decided to establish his own law firm, specializing in Common Market law, with its head office in Paris. With tariff walls falling, capital and technology moving on a new scale across national boundaries and American investment pouring into Europe, his clientele expanded rapidly. He had branch offices in New York and London; his practice prospered.

But trade between East and West was not developing as he had hoped. He saw the need for peaceful collaboration becoming ever more pressing.

In a 1500-page book "Co-existence and Commerce", published in 1970, he further pursued his theory that only by expanding economic ties with totalitarian countries can complete annihilation of humanity be prevented.

Pisar does not believe that an autobiography can serve as a guide to others, but he thinks it an appropriate way of popularizing his views. He is really very pessimistic with regard to our future and that of our children. As one of the few who escaped death among so many who perished, he feels it is his obligation to contribute to a just and lasting peace so that the horrors he witnessed will not be repeated. The combination of inanimate technology and human brutality which he had experienced himself shows that Man is quite capable of resorting to wholesale annihilation. Auschwitz may have been merely a rehearsal for a global Armageddon. Nevertheless, he retains some optimism: as long as hope pulsates within us, like blood, salvation is possible.

This is an important book which ought to be read by the rising generation. Samuel Pisar is like an Old Testament prophet warning his contemporaries of the coming doom, unless they mend their ways.

Edith Sowej.

DISCORD WITHIN THE BAR

by

Benjamin Sidney

Sydney. The Law Book Co. Ltd., 1981, \$19.50

Novels are not normally within the purview of this Journal. This one, however, has an interest to the Australian Jewish historian because the author has used as his pseudonym the two first names (in reverse order) of the late Sydney B. Glass, one of the founders of the Australian Jewish Historical Society and its first honorary secretary, and by now it is an open secret that Benjamin Sidney is the Honourable Mr. Justice Harold H. Glass, Q.C.

The story which the author tells is credible and readable and its ending is unpredictable and exciting; and it paints a portrait of the legal profession in which "Currents of envy and resentment, cross-currents of rivalry and antipathy and counter-currents of admiration and esteem flowed in all directions ... Judges were supposed to be above the struggle but sometimes were not."

This is Benjamin Sidney's first novel; the reading public will be looking forward to more from the same pen.

Rabbi Raymond Apple, A.M.

Ed:

The author's story revolves around a factory accident causing the plaintiff serious injury although the real cause is obscure. The close-knit

world of the N.S.W. Bar becomes involved in the case affecting the personalities of the Judge and the rival advocates in the courtroom tensions. The conflicts of the legal drama extend beyond the walls of the court. As a reviewer has noted, the writer presents us with an image of a profession now under increasing public scrutiny and challenge. But the story, as the writer says in his Prologue, is wound back to the "halcyon" days of 1965 and beyond, when the profession was still rooted in traditional attitudes and practices, before social changes began to overtake it. He shows that below the smooth appearance of a conservative professional group, there were inner convulsions that would come to the surface, depicting some of the reality that was less known and seen by the general public. Certain of the incidents in the novel would appear to have had some basis in the author's own experiences.

JOHN MONASH

by

Geoffrey Serle

*Melbourne University Press. In Association With Monash University,
600 pages, \$27.50*

The Melbourne City Council at its meeting on 9 October 1918 passed a special resolution conveying to Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash their appreciation for his "skill resourcefulness and valour" in his decisive victory at the Battle of Montbrehain on 5 October. It was this victory in battle that led to the eventual German collapse and Armistice a month later.

The achievements of Monash in battle have been recorded by a number of writers, of note perhaps C. E. W. Bean, the official War Historian, but there is little doubt that 5 October, 1918 was the day that established for all time Monash as an Australian hero.

John Monash was born in Melbourne in 1865. As a small boy, in 1875, he moved with his parents to live in Jerilderie in New South Wales and there came under the influence of a young schoolmaster, William Elliot. It was Elliot who first noticed his fine academic abilities and suggested to Monash's parents that they should take him to Melbourne where he would be able to obtain a more advanced education. An outpost in the Riverina district was hardly the stimulatory atmosphere for such a young boy.

As both his parents were German Jews, John Monash was brought up in a bilingual speaking home and many of the attitudes of his family environment were those of contemporary German Jewry. For his education he was sent to Scotch College in East Melbourne, then under the headmastership of Dr. Alexander Morrison. He progressed well. For his religious education he attended the East Melbourne Synagogue and studied

under the Rev. Isidore Myers. He sang in the Synagogue choir led by Louis Pulver. At this period he lived with his mother and two sisters in Richmond and walked both to school and synagogue.

One of the special attributes of John Monash was that from his early boyhood he regularly kept a diary and meticulously recorded much of his early life — he listed his barmitzvah presents: from his parents, a microscope, a Shakespeare and uncle Graetz's *History of the Jews* in a French translation, autographed; a gold watch from Uncle Max and gold studs from Aunt Ulrike; a chemical set from Albert; Haydn's sonatas, a stamp album, a knife. It is Monash's great effort to record so much of his life in his diaries and to retain his correspondence that has allowed Geoffrey Serle to intimately depict the life of a young Jewish man in Melbourne around 1880. In fact the author portrays much of the story of three Jewish brothers, Louis, Julius and Max migrating to Melbourne and trading first as merchants and then as needs required moving to the frontier towns of the Riverina to establish their stores, in the hope of making an adequate livelihood to provide for their families. The very ambition of these families in an alien culture and in a harsh hinterland gives a picture of the environment of John Monash's early life. At Scotch College he followed his scholarly pursuits and for the first time in 1881 we see something of his brilliance when Dr. Morrison asked him to return so as to excel at the University matriculation exams — John Monash was Dux of Scotch College in 1881. This was his first major achievement.

As a University student he gathered around him a group of fine young men who later were to attain much success in their careers — he found a new pursuit and joined the University Company, Victorian Rifles on 8 July 1884, and for the next 30 years was to have an active career in the citizen forces.

By 1890 the young engineer was a "man about town" interested in both literary and social activities, military training and bush walking. Likewise, he was involved in a number of love affairs with varying fortunes. Eventually, John decided to marry Victoria Moss, born in Melbourne in 1870, of Anglo-Jewish parents. Her family were associated with the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation and it was Rabbi Dr. Joseph Abrahams of that Congregation that was to marry them in the Freemason's Hall, Collins Street on 8 April 1891. Their only child, a daughter, Bertha was born on 22 January 1893. Vic., his new wife was very different in character to John. Serle writes that she was materialistic, engrossed in superficial social life and flirtatious. This section of the book relates an enormous amount about the early years of John Monash. His background was not indeed the norm of young Australian Jews growing up in the latter part of the 19th century. His German environment was strong in his personal character — endurance, music, militarism and less emphasis on materialism. At this period in Australian Jewish history a young man seemed to seek materialism, traditional Jewish values and in many cases — Australian nationalism — the Commonwealth came into being in 1901. Geoffrey Serle has depicted what is without doubt a very fine character interpretation of Monash and his background. Current generations of Australians should clearly look at the steadfastness of character and

courage necessary to succeed in that earlier generation. The Monash papers have enabled Serle to create a deep understanding of a young Jew. The portrayal is not the norm. Monash had not grasped normal Australian Jewish attitudes — not a sportsman, religious adherent or nationalist — but twenty years later at Montbrehain he clearly stood on the pinnacle of Australian national achievement — he had risen to be one of Australia's greatest sons.

In the years that followed the birth of his daughter, John Monash endured a wavering marriage and an innovative professional practice that was difficult to establish. All this made great demands on his personality. After about twenty years his business interests were commercialised, leading to some sort of material independence. In 1911 he bought a "Berliet" motor car when cars were just beginning to gain popularity. In 1912 he acquired "Iona", a substantial residence in St. George's Road, Toorak that was to be his lifetime home. In these years of success he and Vic. became part of the social life of Melbourne.

After the outbreak of War, in October 1914 he was given command of the 4th Infantry Brigade, A.I.F. and sailed for Egypt soon afterwards. He served on Gallipoli, in England at Salisbury and then during the 1916 Offensive in France. His real glory was achieved at Hamel and Montbrehain during the months of August to October 1918. He was knighted in the field by King George V on 9 August 1918. After the Armistice, Monash left for England. Geoffrey Serle tells of "The Blare and Blaze of Fame" thrust on John Monash before his return to Australia. In England he was feted among the great Anglo-Jewish families. He dined with Sir Herbert Samuel, Sir Adolph Tuck, Waley Cohen, several of the Rothschilds and the Montefiores, Sir Philip Magnus, Lord Swaything, the Earl of Reading, Sir Frederick Nathan, Sir Herbert Jessel and their families. Lady Monash and his daughter joined him in London but unfortunately Lady Monash died soon after their return to Australia. It was being suggested that Monash should become the first Governor of Palestine but such Office did not interest him.

He had a very active life in the years at home. He identified with many patriotic efforts for returned soldiers and was for a decade Chairman of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria which he organised, established and led with outstanding success, albeit the petty politics in between. Serle sees him in these years as an Australian patriot, Jew and a National leader. He was universally respected for his greatness. In Sydney, on 11 March 1923 he signed the Charter of the New South Wales Jewish War Memorial jointly with a long list of distinguished Jewish leaders, including Rabbi Francis L. Cohen, John J. Cohen, Ernest L. Davis, Orwell Phillips, Alroy M. Cohen, John Goulston and Arthur Hyman. It was one of Monash's many active associations with the Jewish community. His friendship with Lizette Bentwich is covered in the latter part of the book at length. She was a member of the Australian branch of a noted Anglo-Jewish family. She was a resident in London for some years, and in her personality John Monash found a woman who was a conversationalist with a wide range of interests to match his great intellect. Anyhow, she accompanied him for a whole decade and shared much with him during his years of achievement.

Some twenty years ago, Sir Robert Blackwood, Chancellor, when opening Monash University described Sir John as "one of the two or three of the greatest of all Australians". To be privileged to write on such a public figure is indeed an honour and reward to an historian. Geoffrey Serle had an excellent advantage of access to his subject's extensive personal papers. He has compiled a wonderful social history of a Jew and has very rapidly grasped an understanding of Jewish values and a deep appreciation of both ethnic attachment and religious conviction in Australian Jewish life. It is a very fine insight of a personality and the author has shown his marked literary abilities. He is to be complimented for this very full biography — a must for any real student of Australian Jewish history — indeed up front for anyone interested in reading about the character development of a national personality — in every way John Monash has gained an imperishable place in the niche of fame.

Isidor Solomon, A.A.S.A., A.C.I.S.

"DINKUM MISHPOCHAH"

by

Eric Silbert

Published by Artlook Books, 1981

Price: \$19.95 (hardback); \$11.95 (paperback)

In the interests of the collection and recording of Australian Jewish history, here is a rich store-house of communal, social and political history in its developmental stages. The autobiography is a genre of literature to be welcomed by historical societies. This work, begun as a letter to the author's children, was later extended into history, written autobiographically, for the public. Thus, it is rich in detail, written with the easy fluency of one familiar with his subject, and writing a letter to his children. The style is to be recommended for those who "have a story to tell".

Having said this, though, it is necessary to add that one could have wished for a more positive analysis of the events of history. Eric Silbert's family (through the marriage of Abraham Silbert to his niece, Fanny, at the turn of the century), and his wife, Joan Tate's family, have been closely associated with the history of Western Australian Jewry, and particularly that of Perth, for almost 10 decades. Much of this story is recorded in detail in the approximately 340 pages of the book. The reader is given a full account of families whose communal and synagogal involvements the author attributes to the fact that "A vital part of the way of life of both my grandparents was their Jewishness . . ." The grandparents, Abraham and Fanny Silbert and Joseph and Bella Masel, and their descendants, and the families inter-linked are set out in the accompanying family tree. Besides

the families Silbert, Masel, Breckler, Tate, Sharp, Troy, Arkwright, Freedman, there are a score of other families. Abraham and Fanny "discovered" Australia just when the Perth and Fremantle synagogues were being built. The (first) Perth Synagogue was consecrated in 1897, and the (shortlived) Fremantle Synagogue, some six years later.

Because of its easy style, "Dinkum Mishpochah" tends to be gulped down in hearty draughts: it is anything but subtle and sensitive, and, by its very nature, its rough, tangy Australian flavour lies a little harshly on the tongue, giving the palate plenty to interest it. One feels, reading the book, that through the writing of it, the author will find an integrated identity: through these personal recollections, history comes to life. Some of it is rather too subjective, though. The reader is warned in the Introduction that the author is a "talker not a writer". Then, in conclusion, he reminds his children that it was to meet their request, "Tell us about some of the things that have happened to you", that he embarked on what turned out to be for him "a rewarding exercise". It is an episodic and anecdotal book. Silbert was born into a comfortable Jewish Fremantle family in the early 1920s. He was educated at the Christian Brothers College and Aquinas College, whilst attending Hebrew School at weekends, and, with an attachment to a Wesleyan scout troop. He joined the RAAF as soon as he turned 18. Later, he seems to have enjoyed the adventures as Wireless Operator with a Pathfinder bomber crew. It has been noted elsewhere that he received the D.F.C., and, held the Pathfinder Award.

After the War, Silbert entered the family business of his father, Barney Silbert; then he married, and, became involved in Jewish communal and civic life, and, particularly with the Liberal Jewish movement in Perth. Although not a foundation member of Temple David, he held every honorary position on the Board of Management, including that of President. He was active in the establishment of the Anzac Forest project in Israel, and, attended the opening of the Memorial Forest. Returning to Australia, he addressed over 60 Jewish and non-Jewish organisations in city and country areas, as far distant as Esperance and Moora, to speak about the State of Israel and its objectives, its aims and its achievements. He worked hard to encourage migration to the Perth community, both from overseas and from the Eastern States. One of the most distinctive elements of the work is the author's handling of the disputes between Orthodox and Liberal congregations.

Silbert was a prominent member in Rotary, also, as President and District Governor. He was a Justice of the Peace, and an honorary probation and parole officer. He was elected, in 1970, unopposed, to the presidency of the W.A. Jewish Board of Deputies. He served as President of the Methodist Ladies College Parents and Friends, was associated with Rostrum, and, he encouraged his children to participate in sports, as he himself did. Several of his four children represented Australia at the Maccabi Games in Israel.

The author includes a kind of rough glossary of Yiddish terms, which he describes as "some of Dad's words and expressions. They are not necessarily correct but are what they represented to me." This may explain

his rather irritating colloquial distortions — in one instance the term “Yontif”, a Festival day, and in another, “Yom Tov”.

I doubt whether his children, or posterity, would have lost much from the omission of details of the girls who had hoped to become “Mrs. E.S.” He would surely know that polite society requires that a lady’s name is never mentioned “in the mess”. Also, certain well-known rabbis, who have done much for the causes of Australian Jewish history, and inter-faith goodwill, as well as the strengthening of Jewish identity, are dealt with less than kindly.

Despite its flaws, the book deserves a wide and thoughtful readership. Historical data is the chief merit of the book, and here, the author has made good use of articles published in the *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society*.

Louise Rosenberg