

OBITUARY

RABBI I. RAPAPORT, O.B.E., Ph. D.

Rabbi Isaac Rapaport, Chief Minister of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation (1952-1979), died in Israel on 3 March, 1985. The Congregation held a Memorial Service on 28 April last, and the following is an extract of the eulogy delivered by Rabbi Porush.

Rabbi Rapaport was born in Jaslo, Poland, in 1909. He had his secondary education at the Hebrew Gymnasium in Lodz, and studied at the University, the Institute of Jewish Studies, and the Yeshiva in Warsaw. From the Warsaw University he obtained in 1936 a scholarship to pursue post-graduate studies in London where he gained a Ph.D. from King's College for a thesis on Assyrian Archaeology, and his Minister's Certificate from Jews' College in 1940. He was Minister at the Amersham Synagogue for 3 years, when he joined H.M. Forces as a Chaplain in Italy, Greece and North Africa. From 1947 to 1950 he served as Minister in Leicester, and after obtaining the Rabbinical Diploma from Jews' College, as Rabbi of the Stokes Newington Synagogue. In 1955 he received a "call" from the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation to fill the vacant position of Chief Minister and Av Beth Din in that City, which he occupied with distinction until 1979.

As to his qualifications, Chief Rabbi Brodie, in a letter of recommendation said: "... Rabbi Rapaport is an eloquent and thoughtful preacher who has a very fine command of the English language... he is held in high esteem by the Principal and staff of Jews' College... he served as chaplain in association with me and I found him most conscientious in the discharge of his duties and very popular with all personnel... he specialised in education and youth work and did much in the field of Jewish-Christian relations... he also gained experience at the London Beth Din."

As Av Beth Din and spiritual head of Melbourne Jewry's Mother Congregation he was recognised as senior Rabbi of the community. He was received with great expectation, and, indeed, he plunged himself whole-heartedly into his manifold duties. He organised study circles (shiurim) and lectures at his home and at the synagogue, tried to re-ignite the interest of the young people and to teach them Judaism, and administered consistently the work of the Beth Din. His ideology was that of *Torah-Im-Derech-Eretz*, of combining strict religious observance and Jewish knowledge with general education. As a preacher he was eloquent, erudite and always conveying a worth-while message, whether it was to disseminate knowledge, or to fortify *Yiddishkeit*, or to plead for the needy of the community, or to champion the cause of Eretz Yisrael, or to condemn the hostility of our enemies, or to denounce the indifference of the world to Jewish suffering, or to promote the high ideals of freedom and humanity which were trodden upon by so many nations, or to denounce those who tried in the name of progress to detract from the path of Torah-true Judaism and the Halacha, or to call the congregation's attention to its weaknesses and pleading for greater participation and better attendance of the Sabbath Services.

Rabbi Rapaport was persistent and courageous in upholding the principles in which he believed, even at the expense of popularity. He was at times rigid, if not severe, in his attitudes and often in conflict with the lay community as well as his colleagues. A serious bone of contention, especially in later years, was his handling of Beth Din affairs. Here he maintained a position, unyielding and perhaps even autocratically, which some Rabbis, including the Chief Rabbi, regarded as untenable. When Chief Rabbi Jakobovits submitted a plan for re-organisation of

the Beth Din — more in accordance with accepted tradition and the realities of the local situation — Rabbi Rapaport refused to depart from the status quo even when the plan in question had been approved by the Council of Orthodox Synagogues in Victoria. He found himself isolated at times from those who sincerely tried to be friendly and helpful.

His forte was his pen as much as his speech, whether in Yiddish or English, being possessed of a fine style and a convincing presentation. He wrote prolifically, and he was the only Rabbi to make Yiddish his regular literary medium, publishing 10 books — 6 of them in English and 4 in Yiddish. Some were of a scientific nature relating to his field of academic studies at the University, but most dealt with the challenge of the non-Jewish world and with the defence of Israel and the Jewish people. He was a staunch religious Zionist and *Ahavat Yisrael* was a cornerstone of his ideology. His letters to the Press, some of which were collected in his book, *Brave Israel will Triumph*, are a testimony to his burning love for his people and for Eretz Yisrael. His writings are his greatest, most enduring contribution, as a spiritual leader.

As senior Rabbi he represented the Jewish community with dignity and grace at official functions. He was often invited to represent Jewry at meetings called to promote social, charitable and public activities in the general community of Victoria. He was honoured with the O.B.E. in 1973 in recognition of his services. In 1979 he retired from his post and went on Aliyah to be with his children and grand-children. Whilst in Israel he wrote for Biblical journals. He passed away peacefully in Givatayim on Shabbat, 9 March last, aged 75 years — *Yehi Zichrono Baruch*.

Israel Porush.

JUDAH WATEN A.M. died in July on the day of his 74th birthday — he was born in Odessa in 1911 and arrived in Perth, Western Australia with his parents early in 1914.

“The first writer in my life was Sholem Aleichem” he wrote, explaining how at his father’s house a group of “indigent migrant hawkers” gathered to hear Chaim Frankel read from New York Yiddish newspapers to which a few wealthier families subscribed.

Recalling the New York account of “Sholem Aleichem’s funeral attended by hundreds of thousands of New York Jews”, Waten said “The Jews like the French are good at giving their writers a grand send off.”

Judah Waten learned to speak English as a young child and his own writing was in English, but his Yiddish heritage of language and literature was always important to him. After he moved from Western Australia to Melbourne he was closely associated with the Jewish authors Pinchas Goldhar (b.1901), Hertz Bergner (b.1907) and a group of pictorial artists who included Yosl Bergner. Their politics were left wing, their stance in art and literature that of social realism or social humanism — it was Goldhar who encouraged Waten to write his fictional reminiscences of childhood that in 1952 were published as *Alien Son* — the first book of this type of direct migrant experience ever written in Australia. Seven novels, another volume of short stories and a book of reportage and reminiscence *From Odessa to Odessa* followed. He was also an excellent book reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

Waten, like so many people in the grey years of the 1950s, suffered from labelling. Because of his political leaning he was not considered an acceptable candidate for official patronage.

Some of his moving, compassionate fiction, for instance in his novel *The Unbending*, explores the problems of Eastern European Jewish migrants, not only in relation to the Australian community and lifestyles as a whole but, also, and sadly, as newcomers who found little in common with long established Australian Jewish people and communal organisations (including synagogues and Rabbis) which reflected the predominant English and German origins of Australian Jewry.

I must confess that, before I first met Judah Waten, I was apprehensive, for one of the not very sympathetic families and one of the uncongenial rabbis in one of his novels were recognisably my own kin and I am honest too, and thought I might have to tell him that.

As it turned out I met one of the nicest, most interesting, and best informed of Australian writers — a man who was most deeply concerned for and on behalf of his friends of all ages and walks of life. Alas, I was insufficiently musical to fully share the richness of Waten discourse, but we were good friends for some twenty-five years thereafter. In 1973 he and I were appointed to the newly established Literature Board and I came to appreciate his wide knowledge and utter objectivity.

He is survived by his wife Hyrell, a retired secondary-school principal, and his daughter Alice, a professional violinist.

The final words are Judah's own:

"Although half of my work is about foreign Jewish migrants I do not regard myself as a Jewish writer, but as very much an Australian writer who happens to be of Jewish extraction. I am very happy that my work is accepted as part of Australian writing. . . But Australia is part of the world and human beings are human beings wherever they happen to live.

I think that for all writers, big and small, it is at home that the true fire burns with all its warmth and light. However limited it is, his home base will in the long run be a writer's mainstay, certainly for the writer from the smaller countries, and Australia, despite its size, is one of them. You might have some success in faraway places where they make you king for a day. I myself have had a number of novels published in England and in nine European and Asian countries, and at least a dozen of my stories have been translated into ten languages. In the long run, however, the people that matter are those who stand behind you through thick and thin. Those are your own people. Your small world will not forget you as quickly as the big world does."

Nancy Keesing

Ed. Athol Burns, in a letter in *Australian Jewish Times*, states that he knew Waten as a boy and believed him to be 77 years old. Waten posthumously gained the Patrick White Literary Award.