

A LIFE TO LIVE . . . AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Israel Kipen (Burwood, Vic: Chandos Publishing 1989; 314 pp.)

This is a really remarkable book, surely one of the best autobiographies ever written by an Australian Jew. Virtually since he arrived here in 1946, Israel Kipen has been one of the most esteemed leaders of the Melbourne Jewish community. He has served as President of the State Zionist Federation, in 1959–61, and was one of the founders of Bialik College with a commitment to the school and its philosophy over many decades. Most recently, he has served as Chairman of the Jewish Joint Tertiary Education Committee in Melbourne, and was instrumental in securing funding for the Arnold Bloch Lectureship in Modern Jewish History at Melbourne University.

Born in Bialystok in 1919, Kipen came from a typical small clothing manufacturing family, Zionist and observant, that experienced pre-Holocaust Polish anti-Semitism first-hand. He was in Bialystok when it was bombarded and over-run by the Nazis in 1939 before being immediately handed to the Soviet Union as part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. He made his way first to Vilna, then through the Soviet Union to Japan, and finally to Shanghai, where he spent the war years. His family, deported to the Soviet Union as 'class enemies' by Stalin, also survived the war intact, eventually joining the author in Australia in 1948. Virtually all of his more distant relatives, his classmates, friends, and community perished in the Holocaust. Kipen's account of life in Bialystok, and of his escape to Japan via Russia, are extraordinarily gripping.

One does not know which aspect of the autobiography to admire most — Kipen's engrossing description of pre-war Poland, his narrow escape in 1940–41, his account of Shanghai Jewry during the war, or the detailed exposition of his life in Australia and of the post-war Jewish community.

Two features of this book, however, are to me especially interesting. The first is that both his pre-migration and post-immigration life are covered as part of a continuous narrative. This is rare, as most autobiographies of Australian Jews who survived the Holocaust tend to discuss only their pre-Australian experiences and ignore virtually any facet of their subsequent life in Australia, under the mistaken view that what is less dramatic is less interesting. Secondly, Kipen's book is one of only a remarkably small number of autobiographies by our post-war communal leaders. Others that come to mind are Max Freilich's *Zion in Our Time*, the autobiographical portions of works by Benzion Patkin on the history of Mount Scopus College, and by Rabbi Israel Porush on the history of the Great Synagogue, Sydney; the unpublished manuscript autobiography of Sir Archie Michaelis, and perhaps Eric Silbert's *Dinkum Mishpochah*. This is a pity, and much contemporary history from the 'inside' will certainly be lost by the failure of our leaders to put their memories on paper.

Of these personal accounts of life as seen by a post-war Australian Jew, Kipen's may well be the best, not merely in the scope and interest of the events surveyed, but in the fluency of its narrative and writing style and, especially, the cogency of its presentation. For instance, I found Kipen's detailed description of his early struggles here as a textile manufacturer and distributor just after the war fascinating, and these details — normally eliminated from most autobiographies as point-less trivia — will be particularly interesting to future generations when direct memory of this period has disappeared. Similarly, the account of internal Zionist politics in Australia, especially during the 1950s and early 1960s when, seemingly,

'nothing happened', is especially significant for future researchers in this area. The sophisticated depiction of wartime Shanghai Jewry is also extraordinarily valuable. An excellent selection of photographs, especially of post-war Australian Jewish life, further add to the book's value.

A Life to Live . . . deserves to be read by all Australian Jews, whether their interest is in the tragedy of European Jewry, the triumphant rebirth of Israel, or the construction of the vibrant Australian Jewish community we know today. They will find it all here, seldom if ever better told or better produced.

Professor W. D. Rubinstein

MIETEK GRINGLAS: A BIOGRAPHY

Mark Moshinsky (Melbourne: The Gringlas Family, 1989; 267 pp.)

This is an important and extraordinarily interesting biography of Mietek Gringlas, a Polish Jew who survived the War in the Soviet Union, migrated to Australia in 1946, and founded a successful electrical manufacturing firm in Melbourne. It is written by his grandson, Victoria's Rhodes Scholar in 1989. Two factors give the biography its distinction and interest: the remarkably interesting life which Gringlas has experienced, both in Europe and here, and the extremely high quality of the writing and production, both of which are first-rate.

Mietek Gringlas grew up in a fairly well-to-do Jewish family in Warsaw; when the War came he was called up to the Polish army and eventually spent most of the War in the Soviet Union, working as an electrical engineer. Miraculously, his wife (the late Lida Gringlas), also from Warsaw, and daughter Ada (now Ada Moshinsky) managed to join him, although stationed in different parts of the Soviet Union. Virtually all of his other relatives, including his parents and sister, perished in the Holocaust. In 1946 the Gringlases came to Melbourne, founding the C.M.G. Electrical Motor Company. His wife died prematurely in 1972, as did his second wife nine years later. Despite these losses, he has established a large and successful family here.

This story is told with very considerable ability by his grandson Mark Moshinsky, now a law student at Oxford who certainly could be a successful writer and biographer if he chose to leave the Bar. Gringlas' story is told with amazing, often shocking, frankness and is continuously gripping. The many photographs are aptly chosen and fascinating. Although the biography's excellent account of pre-War Polish Jewry, of the Holocaust, and life in Stalinist Russia will, naturally hold the reader's interest with particular vigour, the history of the family in Australia is just as interesting, and it is to the credit of Mark Moshinsky that both parts are told so fully. To students of Australian Jewish history, there are many details of great value revealed here. We learn (p. 155) that 'many of the Jewish passengers' on the refugee boats which arrived here after the War 'were officially travelling as Poles, Hungarians, Germans or other nationalities' to get around the Australian government's 25 per cent limit on the number of Jews in any ship. It is now known that a number of former Nazis were travelling here in the same ships posing as Jews: the material for a memorable black comedy. The Gringlas family had absolutely no trouble obtaining a visa to Australia once a sponsor — a former workmate of Lida's, who had migrated to Australia before the War — was found. Gringlas apparently met no anti-Semitism whatever here — at least none is reported — but met with con-