

A PALETTE OF ARTISTS: A HISTORY OF THE BEZALEL FELLOWSHIP OF ARTS IN MELBOURNE

Ken Bandman (Melbourne, Bezalel Fellowship of Arts, 1989, 128pp.)

In the aftermath of World War II, Australia became home to a number of Jewish artists both proven and fledgling come from Europe. As early as 1945, Karl Duldig, who had arrived in 1940 as a deportee from his erstwhile haven, Singapore, held his first one-man exhibition at Kozminsky Galleries; in 1952, architect and town-planner Ernest Fooks exhibited his paintings and drawings at the same venue; in 1957, both the Judaeon League and the Young Lions held art exhibitions, the latter as part of a wider Jewish Festival of Art organised by Shmuel Gorr; in 1961, another exhibition was mounted under the auspices of B'nai B'rith.

By this time, there seemed to be a sufficient number of Jewish artists at work to warrant an artists' organisation being formed. Accordingly, in the following year, 1962, under the patronage of Rabbi Dr. Israel Brodie and the then Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Eric Westbrook, the Jewish Society of Arts was established and a specifically Jewish art gallery — the *Ben Uri Gallery* — inaugurated. The Society had an impressive programme of lectures, instruction classes, study courses and entertainments planned for its members; but, in the way of many pioneer bodies which appear and disappear almost within the blinking of an eye, lack of interest, the waning of the initial novelty of an arts' organisation, and differences over the future direction of the Society led to its rudely swift demise.

And yet, almost paradoxically, a felt need for a Jewish artists' body remained, for, hard on the heels of the Jewish Society of Arts, on Thursday 21 May 1964, the Bezalel Fellowship of Arts was effectively launched at the East St. Kilda home of Feliks and Martha Ash. Appropriately, the most eminent of its members, Karl Duldig, was elected its first President; Percy White, the noted Australian portraitist, became its first official Patron; while other foundation committee-members were Dr. Morris C. Davis, Hans Friend, A. Mushin, Martha Ash, Felix and Mina Werder, Henry Ross, Slawa Duldig, Adela Shaw, Mary Rook and Hedy Brent. Following the lead of the Jewish Society of Art in naming its gallery *Ben Uri*, the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah, the new organisation adopted the name *Bezalel*, Uri's soon-to-be-more-famous son, the 'craftsman in metal, timber and precious stakes' (Exodus 31: 2–11), chosen, on account of his talent, to design the Tent of Meeting, the Ark and the Ark cover. Through the adoption of this name, the local Bezalel also deliberately linked itself with the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem founded in 1906 by Boris Schatz, a young sculptor originally from Kovno, Lithuania, who had also been Director of the Bulgarian Arts Academy.

Unlike its forerunner, that is, the Jewish Society of Arts, the Bezalel Fellowship proved a stayer and, in 1989, marked its 25th anniversary, the book, *A Palette of Artists*, being the most tangible and durable memento of that milestone, billing itself as 'a brief history, recalling its beginnings and its functions; remembering its members and many friends . . . [and] fully illustrated with many art reproductions in colour or black and white, as well as thirty-five short biographies of artists.'

The many and diverse activities of Bezalel apart — lectures, demonstrations, art exhibitions, auctions, balls, scholarships for artists, etc. — what emerges repeatedly and most strikingly with each successive pen-portrait is the dogged pursuit of the artistic vocation by so many who had, in earlier years, been effectively uprooted — more often by ineluctable necessity than by choice — from their place of birth and

tossed by a (grotesque) accident of history upon Australian shores. Had the intent and format of the book been different from the one at hand, its personae considered *in toto* could well have represented the vast sweep and scope of the 20th century Jewish experience in most of its major manifestations.

Among the artists here presented are immigrants who opted for Australia as early as 1913 as in the case of Morris Davis' family hailing from London where he had been born, and others who came in the 1920s, for example, Charles Aisen from Chelm (1926), Annia Castan's parents from Smorgonyi in Russia — hence her maiden name Smorgon, her father having been Norman Smorgon (1927) — and Rosie Dorin-Duldig, nee Goldman, originally from Antwerp (1927). In time, they were followed by still other immigrants and also by refugees who, though they may have arrived here years later, had endured and come through the many and parlous vicissitudes of pre-war and war-ravaged Europe. A number of those delineated here had, either alone or through their parents, made timely escapes from Vienna, Germany or Poland on the very eve of imminent war, the March 1938 *Anschluss* of Austria and *Kristallnacht* in November of the same year being sufficient evidence for many, if evidence were needed, that, in some not yet fully defined way, Jews were ear-marked for treatment in qualitative ways far different from that which was to befall other, more incidental, civilian casualties of war. Among these were Hedy Brent, for example, and Gretl Barnes, Karl and Slawa Duldig, Fred Inlander, Ruth Spivakovsky, Albert Krantz, and brother and sister Hans Friend and Marianne Roth. These artists were complemented by others who had passed through concentration, extermination and, later, Displaced Persons camps on the way to Australia. Among those included in Bandman's book are Martha Ash, Saba Feninger, David Gilbert, Marysia Kohn, Eva Nissen, Adela Shaw, Devi and Felix Tuszynski, Harry Waters and Anna Zandberg; while others still had survived ghettos, or been in hiding or had fought with the partisans, for example, Hedva Pistol and Joseph Silberstein, or had experienced Siberian exile and, later, repatriation to their native homes, e.g. Elizabeth Herzog and Shana Kustin, nee Schuster, or had, as 'enemy aliens' found themselves expelled from British colonies too close to the war zone and interned in Australian settlements, among them, as already mentioned, Karl Duldig who was deported from Singapore to Tatura in Northern Victoria. Add to these artists those such as Fred Inlander, Aviva Kamil and Sarah Saaroni who, over the years, also made their way to these antipodes either via Palestine and, later, Israel; or, like Louis Kahan and Michel Brous who had left Vienna and Lodz respectively for France, the one in 1925, the other in 1930, and had seen out the war with the French Forces, via Paris; or, like Lotte Scharf, originally from Czechoslovakia, via Bucharest; or Joseph Edelman, via Russia; and those artists, perhaps the most fortunate of all, who were simply born here, namely Dulcie Kanatopsky and Freda Kaufman, and the panorama of experience is vast indeed.

All of which raises a particularly relevant issue unfortunately not dealt with in the book.

Let it first be said that, as a memento of the first twenty-five years of the Bezalel Fellowship of Arts in Melbourne, the volume is elegantly produced. It is also uncluttered and pleasing to handle, it has highly attractive and clear reproductions, while the text possesses a fetching lightness of touch and wry humour.

It is at this point, however, where virtue to some may represent a weakness to others. For all its surface pleasures and, from an historical perspective, its intrinsic importance, as a permanent record of an Australian Jewish artists' society and its

more prominent players, the published book reads, at times, too much like a congratulatory, even adulatory, kind of work more suited to some public celebration than to a book — even a commemorative book — where, given the histories of the individual artists described, a more earnest, as distinct from ponderous, approach would have been more apt. To be specific: necessarily, factual biographies are tendered, exhibitions are catalogued, other achievements are listed. This is as it should be. There is no dearth of detail, and Ken Bandman has diligently done his research, both in the form of interviews and in his use of secondary sources. But, though he does refer to the wartime backdrop behind his subjects' stories, what his general lightness, indeed frequent whimsicality of touch, often leads to is a relative absence of any clear notion of the individual artists' driving demons, of their personal credos as human beings and as artists, and, given their very backgrounds, the significance of their respective pasts (or non-significance) in determining their themes and concerns (seldom broached), techniques and choice of media. This seeming timidity to peer, as it were, into the artist's soul represents, to this reviewer at least, a missed opportunity to correlate life and its translation into art.

Regrettably, too — though, one must suppose, inevitably — there are omissions, the bugbear of any author who would take upon himself the task of biographer/historian. Perhaps, some of the known Jewish artists here omitted, for example, Asher Bilu, Joel Ellenberg, Raphael Gurvich, have not been members of Bezalel, but of those who were either very actively involved in the Fellowship or are listed as current members, such capable, original and accomplished artists as Sonya Weinfeld, Leon Wolowski, Jack Koskie, Z. Krantz, Rimona Kedem, Tom Fantl, Anna Blay, and others of a younger guard should have been included.

At the conclusion of his narrative, Mr. Bandman recognises that the time has come to 'revamp' the Fellowship. In particular, he points a way towards its expansion and invigoration by such younger artistic blood as exists in the Jewish community. And none can quibble with him on this point. Twenty-five years down the track since its formation, expansion and invigoration are a *sine qua non* if Bezalel is to celebrate its Jubilee another twenty-five years hence.

Dr. Serge Liberman

BLIND LOYALTY: AUSTRALIA AND THE SUEZ CRISIS 1956

W. J. Hudson (Melbourne University Press, 1989, 157 pp)

Everyone agrees that the Suez Crisis of 1956 was a turning-point in international affairs, Britain's centuries-old claim to unquestioned great power status being the chief casualty of the debacle. Australia's role in the affair, though peripheral and secondary, was surprisingly important, with Robert Menzies the leader of the important international mission (probably designed in advance to fail) to persuade Nasser to change his Canal nationalization plans. Most of all, this work — the first study of Australia's role in the Suez crisis — makes abundantly clear the automatic obeisance, simply incredible to our generation, with which Menzies invariably followed Britain's lead. Menzies' slavish devotion was not universally shared by other leading ministers — most notably Foreign Minister Richard Casey who emerges as the book's hero in so far as there is one — but who were unable to dent Menzies' determined policies, the product of his political authority, then as its peak, and his being on the spot in Britain when the Crisis erupted.