

## A GLANCE OVER AN OLD LEFT SHOULDER

Harry Stein (*Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1994; 210 pp.*)

## CROSSING THE PARTY LINE

Bernie Taft (*Scribe Publications, Newham, Vic, 1994; viii + 352 pp.*)

These two books form a useful parallel, illustrating a phase of twentieth-century Diaspora Jewish life once so significant, and now so difficult to understand, the attraction of so many second generation secularized Jews from 1917 until around 1950 to Soviet Communism. There can be little doubt that Jewish Communism — a peculiar and *sui generis* ideological stance, often more Jewish and humanistic than orthodoxly Communist — was a highly typical generational manifestation of those second generation immigrant Jews who also came of age during the interwar years, especially in the dark years of facism and Depression. Whether at New York's City College, in the East End of London or in Melbourne and Sydney, account after autobiographical account has stressed the popularity of Jewish Communism for this milieu. Ideologically, it was clearly a secularized version of Orthodox Judaism (with many emerging from Orthodox immigrant backgrounds) in which the Soviet Union was seen as the Promised Land, its seeming conquest of unemployment and discrimination taking the place of reward in the next world. After the totalitarian nature of Soviet Communism became better known, book after book of a *mea culpa* nature appeared taking "the god that failed" as its theme. These two are interesting and important additions to this autobiographical *genre*, significant for their Australian setting which is so similar to those overseas.

Although I am a personal friend and admirer of Bernie Taft, I found the work by Harry Stein (whom I never met) the more interesting and livelier, especially for its wealth of anecdotal detail and incident, its cheerful sexual reminiscences, and its candour. Only occasionally does excessive self-exculpation intrude. On the other hand, Stein offers no adequate explanation of his intellectual journeyings. Bernie Taft's book seems to me to be much denser, and to be less than frank or satisfactory in explaining how a man of the author's decency and intelligence could fail to break with Communism until the 1980s. Bernie Taft was born and educated in Germany, not reaching Australia till he was around twenty in the late 1930s, and thus emerged from a background more ideological in culture than was normally the case here; as well, he experienced Nazism first-hand, his family fleeing to Palestine a few months after Hitler came to power. As a result, he maintained formal links to Communism far longer than did Stein. Throughout his autobiography Taft repeatedly notes his doubts about Soviet Communism, yet fails adequately to explain why he never broke with the movement.

In particular, I found his discussion of Soviet anti-Semitism unsatisfactory, dating his real knowledge of the continuing Soviet attitude to its Jews from the 1964 publication of the notorious *Judaism Without Embellishment*. This may be, but the question of all the irrefutable evidence of Soviet anti-Semitism before that date, such as the Doctors' Plot, was generally ignored by him, or not satisfactorily explained.

I do not wish to judge Bernie Taft or his generation too harshly. I was born after the War and was not put to the test of "taking sides" during the "Devil's Decade". Nevertheless, the great majority of Jews, including most Australian Jewish leaders, saw through Soviet Communism from the first as the false messiah it was. Indeed, every other ideology within the Jewish community — religious Jews (of every denomination),

Zionists, Bundists, liberal assimilationists — rejected Marxism from Day One. The era of Communism is now, happily, ended, and common sense has, in the long run, prevailed.

Professor W.D. Rubinstein

## MIRACLES DO HAPPEN: MEMOIRS OF FELA AND FELIX ROSENBLOOM

(Scribe Publications, Newham, Victoria, 1994; viii + 192 pp.)

This is the unusual joint memoirs of Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, Auschwitz survivors from Poland who migrated to Australia in 1952. It is of special note in being told from the viewpoint of committed Bundists, and the account given of the internal debates in Bundist circles over the establishment of Israel in 1947-48 is extremely interesting. Their son Henry is now a well-known publisher in Victoria. Like many Jewish survivors who migrated here, they never regretted their choice.

Professor W.D. Rubinstein

## A NEW AUSTRALIAN, A NEW AUSTRALIA

Paul Kraus (The Federation Press, Annandale, NSW, 1994; 148 pp.)

Paul Kraus' previous autobiographical work, *The Not So Fabulous Fifties* (1985), is regarded by many persons, including this reviewer, as a little-known classic of contemporary multi-cultural autobiography. I know of no book which brings to life in so realistic a way the experiences of post-war Jewish refugees to this country, presenting as well an outstandingly vivid depiction of early post-war Australian society. The author, born in Budapest in October 1944 to two Jewish parents who, miraculously, managed to survive the War (his birth certificate, reproduced in *A New Australian ...*, bears the swastika stamp of a Nazi official in its corner), migrated to Sydney as a child of five in 1949, and came to maturity in Australia where the long Menzies years were about to give way to the enormous cultural changes of the 1960s.

This new work is also an autobiography, but extends the material of Kraus' earlier work in two directions. First, he deals frankly and at length with the identity crisis created for him by the fact that his parents, although Jewish, had become Christians in Hungary (as many others did) and in Australia were practicing Anglicans — a topic not mentioned in his previous book — as well as the many other progenitors of marginality and isolation caused by his Hungarian Jewish immigrant origins in the Sydney of the 1950s. Secondly, he weaves his own story round an account of the historical events and changes undergone by Australian society in this era.

It is not a foregone conclusion that the resulting work would be outstanding. All autobiographies communicate either the universal — that is, the mundane — or the particular — what is experienced by only one person — to readers who are bored by one but find the other to be someone else's problem, for, as de la Rochefoucault put it so well, we all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others. Autobiographies which link their author's life to wider events also often fail, seeking a nexus between the infinite ambiguities of individual life and the black-and-white certainties of newspaper headlines