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The Generation That Shaped Our Understanding of the 20th Century Is Gone

The scholars, historians, and political advisers who shaped the West's understanding of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the Islamist Middle East, make way now for—what?

By Walter Laqueur

1.

Some of those who shaped our views on the world after World War II have disappeared in recent weeks and months. I believe I have known all of them, admittedly some better than others. Today's media reports the demise of Pierre Hassner. How to define him? He was one of the most profound and original thinkers on world politics in our time. Whereas many in this field became more and more specialized and narrow, Pierre went in the opposite direction. He was, while he lived, among the most intelligent commentators of global affairs. It would be an exaggeration to claim that many or even all of this generation, a phalanx of geniuses unprecedented in history, were individuals of exceptional ability, knowledge, judgement, and influence. In fact, I could think of some whose ability and influence was perhaps exaggerated in their lifetime, and it is likely that future generations will set the record straight. There is an old Latin saying, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, or of the dead nothing but good is to be said. There

is also another Latin/English saying, *de mortuis nil nisi bunkum*, or of the dead nothing but nonsense. In the following, I put down some of my recollections, having known personally all of them without falling into one extreme or the other.

It is true that all things considered, this generation had exceptional influence on how our views on recent history were shaped. It is also true that historians and political scientists had great influence on our thinking about the new world order, which emerged after WWII. Many of the leading scholars from that era have now disappeared; it is, if you will, the disappearance of a generation.

The influence of historians in politics has dwindled during the last hundred years. In 19th-century France, some of the leading historians were also involved in politics (Michelet, Guizot), but this was no longer the case during the following century. In 19th-century Germany, the confrontation between the liberal Mommsen and the aggressively right-wing Treitschke was one of the main issues in general political debate of the intellectual class. Mommsen, the great historian of the Roman Empire, has among his offspring two worthy historians, Wolfgang who died in 2004 while swimming in the Baltic Sea, and his twin brother, Hans, who died on his 85th birthday in 2015. These two shared a love for German political and social ideas as well as the hereditary bond of being twin brothers. In my opinion, Wolfgang was more talented and more realistic than Hans, but Hans also became of some importance. He was among the main protagonists of the theory that Hitler was, all things considered, a weak dictator. However, this was the usual technique of the "revisionists," whether a ruler was strong or weak was after all a relative statement. But stating a dictator was strong raises the question—compared to whom? The ruler of a

country of many million inhabitants could not possibly intervene and direct everything that went on in daily life. He had to restrict his supervision to the most important events and developments. Seen in this perspective, there is no doubt that the fascist dictators were not at all weak compared to their contemporary Chamberlain or Daladier.

The postwar period was of great interest above all, because of the so called *Historiker Streit*, and the most prominent of the German historians involved was undoubtedly Ernst Nolte (died in August 2016). He was born in a small town in West Germany, and his father was the head of a local primary school. He was interested above all in the sources and the development of Nazism. I remember our first meeting after he had published *Fascism in Its Epoch*. I had reviewed an English translation in *The New York Times*. When he came to London a few months later, he came to dinner to express his gratitude. I had criticized his book in my review, but still, I had found it interesting because it forced the reader to reconsider the causes of the rise of Nazism and fascism in general.

In the years after, Nolte's views became more and more radical, or "revisionist," until he found himself very much isolated, at least among professional historians (especially with colleagues at the Berlin University, where he held a professorship). Yet, among the general public, he found supporters with the rise of neo-Nazism. Nolte believed that the character of Nazism had been described in a far too negative way—he thought Nazism had its positive aspects. In a series of articles, books, and public appearances, Nolte stated that only the crimes of Nazism had been commented upon, and its social policy or its restoration of law and order had instead been ignored. The Holocaust and the destruction of other minorities were left out from Nolte's purview. Several historians were ready to forgive Nolte—and some of his idiosyncrasies, not to put it any stronger—but the majority remained or became opposed. The so-called dispute among historians, which had begun in the 1980s, was more or less over by the end of the millennium. By that time, Nolte was a rank outsider, no longer taken seriously by the serious figures in the field. He on the other hand was not for a moment willing to engage in self-criticism or to admit that his views in any respect had been mistaken and not born out of historical facts.

One of Nolte's early major antagonists was Karl Dietrich Bracher (died in September 2016) who was among the most important figures dealing with Hitler's rise to power and the early years of Nazism. He did not mean to describe the barbaric character of this populist movement. Bracher also became a friend after many meetings at a variety of conferences. I learned later on that he suggested my name for one of the highest German orders. But I was persona non grata in Germany at the time, and those in charge found a way not to accept me since I was not a German citizen. In any case, I'm not at all sure whether I would have accepted such an honor bestowed by Germany in this early period of modern German history. Bracher served as a young soldier during WWII and became an American prisoner of war. It was in these years of captivity that he developed his views on Hitler's rise to power.

Nolte died about two years ago. There must be some scholars and others continuing his work, but they are not well known and I am not familiar with their work. But Holocaust ignoring (rather than denying) was not only Nolte's preoccupation. He was also among those of two other series which have caused some confusion among those studying the period I refer to as "functionalism" and "intentionalism." The concept of functionalism appears in many forms and in various sciences and pseudosciences. What it should mean in the context of Nazism will take a long time to explain and it is, in my view, a waste of time, so those interested will find more than enough information on the internet.

Some other leading students of Germany have died of late, two of the best known were Fritz Stern and Peter Gay. Stern owes his fame to the biography of Bleichroeder, a banker involved in activities all over the globe, who eventually became the personal banker of Bismarck. He also collected and published useful work on historiography since the early days. I am also told that he was a good teacher and he mentions in his biography and elsewhere countless times his conversation with Einstein about the choice of a profession at a time when he was aged 17. He was born in my own hometown and his parents attached themselves to many celebrities in their time, including Fritz Haber, who was other than Einstein perhaps the leading scientist of the time. He also played an important role in the

development of Columbia University's politics department.

Fritz Stern died May 2016, and Peter Gay left us in 2015. Whereas Stern in his working life concentrated on one issue, namely Germany, his contemporary Peter Gay was a man of many parts. Both had their admirers as well as their critics. The 1960s and '70s were the high tide of "centers" at Harvard and elsewhere. Interest was not that great in Germany, which had not yet emerged as a leading center in building a European Union. I was invited to lunch by people from various centers, but they did not find me suited to join them, which I found slightly amusing. My ambition was not to teach, even at Harvard because I knew that I would not be a good teacher. I wanted to do my work in other fields. Peter Gay wrote the story of Weimar culture (paralleling my own book on the subject) but he was also a well-known student of the Enlightenment, and he also wrote about a widely read book on Freud among other subjects. Both Stern and Gay had difficulties with their Judaism. Stern's family converted in the late 20th century and Stern wrote and published more than once about his origins. As far as I know, the Gay family, originally known as Froelich, did not convert, but Peter simply tried to ignore his roots. Religiously, he was not "musical" as the great Max Weber would have put it.

2.

Of these who died in the month of May 2018, the most prominent was Bernard Lewis, professor of Oriental Studies in London. Bernard was a man of very many parts as he graduated not only in London but also in Paris. He is the only historian I came to know who is also a solicitor. I first met Bernard Lewis in the 1950s, when both of us appeared in a conference arranged by Johns Hopkins in Washington devoted to communism and nationalism in the Middle East. Both of us were at that time living in Britain and became members of a small circle, which included also Elie Kedourie, P.J. Vatikiotis, and a very few others. We met quite often in Lewis' home. I was a rank outsider, for all these who were major figures in their fields whereas I was not. They all were masters of Arabic, where my command of the language was that of a villager, or Bedouin, and my knowledge of Arab history and culture was extremely limited. The others were master

linguists having been born in Jerusalem or other major cities in the Middle East. Bernard even knew Aramaic, the language which Jesus Christ spoke. I owed my presence to the fact that I had written in the early 1950s two books dealing with issues that had been neglected by the scholars in the field so far—communism in the Middle East and also Soviet policy in this part of the globe. Writing these lines more than 60 years later, I would have put much in these books differently, but as I said, these were the first on these subjects and much was forgiven at the time which would be criticized and contradicted today.

After the conference, we returned to London, where we became friends and visited each other often. Bernard was a wonderful raconteur, and I happily listened to his stories on his experience in British intelligence during WWII. He once told me how he was commissioned by the command to compose an English-Albanian dictionary, when all the help at their disposal was one old dilapidated book that only covered the words from A to K or L. He also loved telling the story of how at the airport from Kabul, well before the current events, he was desperately trying to recollect the words for piece of luggage, only to detect that it was the same as in most other Middle Eastern languages. After his army years, Bernard returned to teaching at London University (SOAS-School of Oriental and Asian Affairs). Bernard's achievements as a scholar have been described by others far more learned as I am in this field.

Bernard's marriage broke up and not all of those familiar with the circumstances fully understood the reasons why he decided to leave Britain together with his two children as a consequence. But it was not up to outsiders to comment or criticize his decision. Bernard was a gentleman of the old school, a mild man, but he would always stick firmly to his principles and was not deflected from them. It could be that his decision was connected with a feeling that with all his knowledge about the Middle East and the Islamic world he had no influence whatsoever on the conduct of his native country. In this respect, the situation in the United Kingdom was quite different from the United States and other countries; those in charge of the conduct of British policy were not to be found in the academic world. Academic studies and the conduct of politics were two worlds apart.

Those whom he had known in Washington had told him that in America use would be made of his wide knowledge on Middle Eastern affairs, and this proved to be correct at least for a while. Senator Jackson became a friend and also those working with him. He appeared in a variety of Congress hearings, and it is reported that President Bush Senior kept a marked copy of one of Bernard's essays near his bed. But while Bernard now exerted a certain influence, this also generated a considerable amount of hostility with the Arab/Middle Eastern lobby. There was a long controversy with Edward Said. Said was a distinguished scholar in the field of literary theory, but he was not a distinguished scholar in the field of Middle Eastern history as he had claimed. He was born in Jerusalem, but he was not a Palestinian expert either. His father had a stationery business in Cairo and Said received most of his education in Egypt and later in America. He had the support of the Arab lobby both in the academic world and in politics.

Bernard was not only attacked by Edward Said and his followers but also by Armenian spokesmen who claimed that he was a Turkish agent; he had begun his academic career as an expert on Turkey. Bernard's enemies were many and some of them were influential. His vast knowledge of the Middle East was derided, and he was described as an intruder into a field of which he knew little or nothing about; all this while these people had not remotely the knowledge and the experience of Bernard.

There was yet another problem. While Bernard had some influence on policy, he had no impact on how his advice was followed up. While Bernard was probably over optimistic when believing that an American intervention in Iraq would provoke great enthusiasm among the local population, he was uncertain, not enthusiastic, if such an intervention would be carried out in a halfhearted way. The same I am sure was his opinion regarding the situation in Syria.

In the academic world, among the experts, the main issue remains the decline of Arab and Islamic influence after the "Golden Age" (the Golden Age, known as the age of the caliphates, lasted from the 8th to the 14th century, was the reign of the Abbasids, above all the legendary Harun al-Rashid, and witnessed both economic development and cultural works of considerable renown). Lewis believed since that period the

Arab world had fallen not only behind in comparison with Europe but also with Asian countries, and there has never been a concerted effort to catch up. Bernard, therefore, was an imperialist spokesman respecting only power whereas those in the "progressive" camp abhorred power. These critics failed to mention that Bernard's scholarly achievements dealing with the Middle Ages (as Europeans would define it) were head and shoulder above, taken in their totality, what others have done. They were motivated by political enmity and therefore their judgement was not just one-sided, but altogether wrong.

Bernard's preoccupation after Sept. 11 was mainly with the Arab world. Originally, he had been preoccupied with Turkey; one can easily fathom what he thought about developments in that country under Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Having arrived in the U.S., he found after some years a new home in Princeton. He also found a new companion, Buntzie Ellis Churchill, with whom he lived in Philadelphia. He celebrated his 100th birthday in the presence of his students and others close to him. He died in New Jersey on May 19, 2018. It would be wrong to maintain that his death was not a milestone in the history of Middle Eastern studies for the simple reason that while there were outstanding experts on certain countries and periods, there was no one with the breadth of Bernard's preoccupations and achievements.

I never became a Middle Eastern expert but still I learned a great deal from Bernard. I was glad to see him represented in a Festschrift dedicated to the present writer. His work is continued by his star pupil, Martin Kramer, the leading figure in the field of contemporary Middle Eastern studies. Martin studied at Princeton under Fouad Ajami, L. Carl Brown, Charles Issawi, and Bernard Lewis, who directed his thesis. Those aforementioned were also outstanding scholars but their preoccupation was with specific topics and not with the general subject of the Middle East. Eventually, Martin became director of the Dayan Center and was a guest professor at many prestigious American universities. Like Bernard Lewis, he was attacked for advocating American involvement in the Middle East odyssey. Among Kramer's fields of research and publications are political Islam,

Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival, and *The Islamism Debate: 1997*.

3.

American interest in the Soviet Union was very small until WWII; it should be remembered that even diplomatic relations between the two countries were only established early in the 1930s. This changed radically during the war. There were certain individuals writing about the subject, refugees of one thought or another. The Harvard Russian Research Center became the most prominent center of Soviet studies and the leading personalities could be found there at one time or another. Among them, and perhaps the leading figure, was Richard Pipes who also died in May 2018. His father was a Polish patriot who fought in WWI with Pilsudski's Legionaries. Pipes went to Kreczmar's Gymnasium, the school attended by the offspring of the assimilated Jewish middle class, and among his schoolmates was Leopold Labeledz, about whom I shall report presently. Labeledz was a son of a Polish father who found himself far away in the depth of Russia. It is a long road from Sibirsk to the capital of Poland especially if the only means of transportation is horse and buggy. Twenty years later, both Pipes and Labeledz escaped from Poland after the German occupation. Labeledz had a hard time in Central Asia, where he found himself. He arrived in London together with the Anders' Army, which had been established in Central Asia by Polish soldiers with the permission of the Soviet authorities. He eventually settled in London. On the other hand, after the war had already broken out, Pipes escaped together with his parents by way of Italy to the United States. He served in the U.S. Armed Forces and later studied Russian. Eventually he became a leading figure in the field of Russian studies at Harvard.

More than a few American academic experts specializing in Soviet affairs worked for the government during certain periods, some for a short time, others for many years. Zbigniew Brzezinski had been assistant professor at Harvard but did not receive tenure; when Harvard changed its mind and after all invited him to join, he had settled at Columbia University and declined the offer.

A few years later, in 1974 to be precise, Donald Rumsfeld, then secretary of defense, unhappy with the information received, insisted on the establishment of "team B" to

counterbalance those in CIA who in his opinion were painting too rosy a picture of Soviet policy intentions. This was the age of détente, a policy advocated by Nixon and Kissinger, who believed that an understanding could be reached on many issues in dispute between the two superpowers. Team B undoubtedly had an influence on the conduct of American policy, but the extent of such an impact is difficult to say even with the benefit of hindsight.

I met Brzezinski during his early years at Harvard, but our first encounter was unfortunate. I had invited him for dinner but had forgotten about it and when he arrived at our house, being an extremely hot day, I was in an advanced stage of undressing. It is ironic that Brzezinski the hawk again joined government under President Jimmy Carter. He served as the nation's security adviser, and I respected his views in some respects but not in others. I believe he was the first proposing American intervention in Afghanistan, which had as we now know unfortunate consequences in the way it was executed. Brzezinski passed away May 26, 2017.

All three just mentioned were of Polish origin and therefore not considered in Moscow to be neutral, let alone friendly commentators as far as the Soviet Union was concerned. Russian-Polish relations had been unfortunate for a long time, and it so happens that much of the information and evaluation of this subject at the time came from Soviet sources.

The Poles were livid about the Brzezinski appointment. The reason for their anger was that Brzezinski was a Pole (his father was appointed to diplomatic service of Poland in Canada). Although Pipes too was originally from Poland, he was seen as less of a threat by the Poles because, unlike Brzezinski, he never intervened in Polish affairs. Another leading Soviet expert was Adam Ulam. He also had an excellent knowledge of the Russian 19th century and wrote a novel on Sergei Kirov. There were the Erlich brothers, one specializing in the Soviet economy, the other in Russian Soviet literature. Generally speaking, scholarly interest in Russian affairs was not limited to covering politics, but probably equal importance was given to Russian and Soviet literature and the Soviet economy. As it subsequently appeared, the economic experts overrated considerably the Soviet economic performance, but this was probably inevitable in

lieu of the absence of reliable statistics. The picture nonexperts received from those who were permitted to emigrate was quite different. Even though still only very few experts predicted the downfall and disintegration of the Soviet Union, by and large they knew considerably more of the state of affairs of the Soviet Union from overseas. Why? The Soviet Union after all was a superpower, so the foreign interest in the country and its system was dictated by security reasons.

Soviet studies centers could be found not only at Harvard but also in other universities, and the prospects for experts in academic Soviet studies were considerably greater than those specializing in Bulgaria for instance.

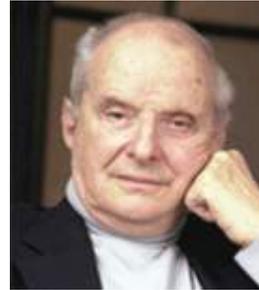
The confrontation continued between the proponents of détente and those who like Pipes believed that the character of the Soviet regime was expansive and the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and other such events seemed to confirm their suspicions.

In the field of Soviet studies, more perhaps than in any other field of world affairs, important groupings were made not only of academics but others such as journalists resident in the Soviet Union or diplomats having concluded that tour of duty. Two of them should be mentioned above all, Leopold Labedz, cited above, and Robert Conquest.

When I founded the journal *Soviet Survey*, I worked together with Jane Degras. Later on, he became an editor of the journal up to its disappearance in the early 1990s. Labedz was a polymath, but suffered writer's block. His books were usually written in correlation with other experts. Therefore, he remains largely in the shade and was posthumously attacked for a lack of knowledge. But in truth, he was an individual with enormous knowledge in the social sciences and history. He was also active in the field of Polish studies and his visits to Warsaw in the early 1990s became a triumph. The real reason for the attacks were found on another level; the fact that he was a Pole made him *a priori* suspect.

The issue of generations passing has preoccupied previous generations: José Ortega y Gasset wrote about it and also Karl Mannheim. The term "generation" is not a synonym for shared political ideology. When a generation disappears, a new one will take its place. However, sometimes there is a void. Sometimes

the new generation is a carrier of a message, but sometimes it is not. We will have to wait and see.



Laqueur was born in Breslau, Lower Silesia, Prussia (modern Wrocław, Poland), into a Jewish family. In 1938, he left Germany for the British Mandate of Palestine. His parents, who were unable to leave, became victims of the Holocaust.

Laqueur lived in Israel from 1938 to 1953. After one year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he joined a Kibbutz and worked as an agricultural laborer from 1939 to 1944. In 1944, he moved to Jerusalem, where he worked as a journalist until 1953, covering Palestine and other countries in the Middle East.

Since 1955 Laqueur has lived in London. He was founder and editor, with George Mosse, of the *Journal of Contemporary History* and of *Survey* from 1956 to 1964. He was also founding editor of *The Washington Paper* ...more

Walter Laqueur was head of the Institute of Contemporary History and Wiener Library in London and concurrently university professor at Georgetown University.

Tablet

Eichmann in Full

Chris Weitz's new 'Operation Finale' elegantly escapes turning into another dreary film that's too embalmed in reverence to deal with real emotions

By Liel Leibovitz

When I was young, my parents had a good friend named Tzvika. He was a bald man with big eyes and a wide smile, the sort of uncle who can make a room cheerier just by walking in and saying hello. I always assumed he was some sort of artist, because he showed me drawings he'd done many years earlier, haunting pastels etched with fury on the pages of a travel guide to Buenos Aires. He'd gone to Argentina, my parents told me later, to kidnap a man named Adolf Eichmann and bring him to justice in Israel.

Tzvika is better known as Peter Malkin, and the story of his role in capturing, guarding, and transporting the architect of the Final Solution to Jerusalem is the subject of *Operation Finale*, a wildly thrilling new film.

If the adjective strikes you as inappropriate given the weighty subject matter, consider all the ways in which the director, Chris Weitz, might've failed. He could have, for example, taken the same tedious route as José Padilha in *7 Days in Entebbe*, slathering the screen with thick layers of symbolism that neither move nor inform; that movie cross cut the raid on the terminal in Uganda with a modern dance performance, delivering one of the most unintentionally comical moments in recent cinema. More pedestrianly, Weitz might've have opted to reduce the film to just one of its elements, giving us a tense psychological drama that rarely leaves the airless room where the Israeli spy and the fugitive Nazi spent nine days engaged in a battle of wits, or else a fast-paced caper of subterfuge and narrow escapes, a sort of *Argo* with Nazis. But Weitz is one of the most underrated directors working today, and—as he had shown in *About a Boy*, say, or the deeply moving *A Better Life*—he understands that interesting films, like interesting people, contain multitudes. When the premise goes low, he goes high, allowing his characters their flaws and imperfections even, or especially, when those rub up against the plot.

And what a wonderfully flawed bunch he has at hand. At the helm is Oscar Isaac as Malkin, impressively true to the man I knew, a playful improviser whose courage is always one step ahead of his good sense. He's supported by *Fauda*'s Lior Raz

as the Mossad's saturnine chief, Isser Harel; Mélanie Laurent as Hanna, a guilt-ridden doctor who wonders what part of the Hippocratic oath covers the forced sedation of a Nazi war criminal; and the deeply moving Nick Kroll as Rafi Eitan, the operation's straight man whose good-natured jokes mask wells of anxiety and pain. Nearly all of the agents dispatched to Argentina to retrieve Eichmann had lost loved ones to his murderous orchestrations, and nearly all are struck, at one point or another, by the urge to tiptoe upstairs to the German's room and indulge in the satisfaction of brutally ending his life.

Weitz lets them all simmer together. Inside the safe house, drunken dinners give way to tense confrontations as the team, like the audience, struggles to come to terms with the blindfolded man they must guard, tied to the bed in his underwear and expressing not a note of remorse. If you're hoping to see the banality of evil on display, you're out of luck: Eichmann is played by Sir Ben Kingsley, who manages to be simultaneously imperious, menacing, and vulnerable even when sitting on the toilet, surrounded by Mossad agents and delivering a monologue about poop, which is more than Kingsley's Gandhi was ever called upon to do.

Outside the house, Eichmann's would-be rescuers are closing in. They are led by his son Klaus, who Joe Alwyn turns into a brooding and blond referendum on compassion. The monster's child, he reminds us, had done no wrong, and the pain he feels at the disappearance of his father is real and ought to rankle. This uneasy realization colors each pulse-quickening near miss a few shades darker, and raises far sharper questions about the intersection of justice and revenge than that other recent tale of Mossad agents out on the hunt, Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner's lugubrious and preachy *Munich*.

But at its heart, *Operation Finale* is a tango between captor and captive, and Isaac and Kingsley sparkle as two men who understand that they've no choice but to allow the other his humanity. To convince Eichmann to sign the papers needed to get him on board the flight to Tel Aviv—El Al, in Weitz's telling, requires the passenger's consent—Malkin has to allow his prisoner increasing doses of dignity, from a smoke and a shave to real emotional intimacy. And the Nazi, in turn, tries to curry favor with the Mossadnik by asking him about his sister Fruma, executed in some frozen forest by the genocidal machine Eichmann had helped design. Begging for news of his own family—he lets out a blood-curdling yelp when he realizes Malkin and his colleagues had done no harm to his wife and his sons—Eichmann trades in empathy, struggling to convince Malkin that he's capable of feeling his pain. He may not be: The

manipulative creep we see in flashbacks, wearing eyeliner, an SS uniform, and an overcoat as he stands haughtily above pits stacked with bodies, like a ghoulish rock star on a stage looking down at his fans, is never far from the surface. As the two men try to decipher each other, the audience does, too, which makes the movie eminently suspenseful even to those of us who've read all there is to read about Eichmann's trial and execution.

This is not only a cinematic achievement, but an emotional one as well. Weitz is confident enough to let us entertain Eichmann's reasoning as well as Malkin's, and he trusts us to find our own way out of the moral thickets that grow when you spend too much time listening to a personable and convincing Nazi. In an age when too many filmmakers fashion their work into banners advancing their political pieties, Weitz gives us something much more valuable, a study in unruly feelings and the extremes we sometimes go to when we strive for or run away from our just deserts.

"The longer one listened to him," Hannah Arendt wrote about Eichmann in her controversial report from his trial, "the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such." Weitz knows better. His Eichmann is demonic precisely because he knows exactly how to think from the standpoint of his interrogator, and knows, too, how to sharpen this skill into a weapon. He sees no reason to empathize other than to gain an advantage, which makes him all the more human and all the more terrifying. Men like him usher in death and misery because they are capable of choosing differently but never do. And men like him can be found in every walk and in every corner of life.

The antidote to such wickedness is to place no burden on our emotional valence, to let us explore whatever reflexive urges lead us to laugh or cry, kiss our lover or pick up a gun. *Operation Finale* lets us do all these things, and in so doing elegantly escapes turning into another dreary film that's too embalmed in reverence to explore anything truly real or interesting. In Weitz's telling, there's life in the old story yet. Tzvika, I imagine, would have approved.

Liel Leibovitz is a senior writer for *Tablet Magazine* and a host of the *Unorthodox* podcast.

Tablet

Etgar Keret's New Book: As Witty as a Good Holocaust Joke

In the writer's latest book, now available in Hebrew, the world remains the same gloomy and absurd place – and the laughter is even less present than before

By Maya Sela

In many ways, Etgar Keret is the writer of my generation. We were born into the same world, we rode the same roads, we watched the same TV shows. When his first two books came out – "Pipelines" in 1992 and "Missing Kissinger" in 1994 – it was the first time that a writer from our generation wrote in our language.



Etgar Keret

People called it lean language, but I'm not sure this was an apt description. The language was devoid of flowery rhetoric and gave voice to a generation that scorned poetical writing and no longer believed in it.

We understood Keret and the path he was taking, outside the mainstream that was captivated by lofty words and "important" literature that dealt with Zionism and the pain of the shooters and criers, and spoke at such a high level when we knew we were really so small. We hated yuppies and their early SUVs, we weren't about to commit to anything – certainly not to talk seriously or pretend that we were important and that anything we said mattered.

Twenty-six years have gone by. Keret became an international star, a little matter that keeps a lot of Israelis up at night, for we can't stand people

who are successful. Actually, we already hated successful types 26 years ago, because, as we saw it then, successful folks were also the ones writing important things, maintaining a serious expression, speaking on behalf of the tribe or the generation.

But the way Keret wrote was different – short, absurd, with sorrow buried deep inside and not named aloud because to do so would instantly render it fake. He was funny, but the way that Holocaust jokes are funny. We liked it, though I'm not sure we understood that these were Holocaust jokes, even if we didn't miss the horror that was in there. The horror was always there, but there was also a perspective, an understanding of the little things, a distancing from the drama. That's still the same. In that, he hasn't changed.

The title of his latest Hebrew-language collection – which translates as “A Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy” – nudges us to acknowledge that there's a galaxy and we're minuscule stars that are burning out in it. Any kind of serious talk, therefore, betrays a lack of awareness. We're pathetic, small, hurting and smoking weed sometimes to help us bear this existential truth. Such are Keret's protagonists, walking around in the world while a past or future little catastrophe lurks in the background.

Years ago I met an American writer at the International Writers Festival at Mishkenot Sha'ananim in Jerusalem. We were chatting, I don't recall about what, and I said something about Holocaust jokes. He froze and then slowly repeated my words back to me: “Ho-lo-caust jokes? Ho-lo-caust jokes?” What's a Holocaust joke, he asked, completely stunned. And it hit me that Holocaust jokes are a dirty little secret that I'd unwittingly revealed. I declined to tell him. I come from a family in which people take their secrets to the grave.

But he was charming and eventually persuaded me to tell, and he was also Jewish so I thought it might do him good to know about his people's rich and secret body of knowledge, and I assessed that he was old enough to enter this orchard. So I told him my favorite Holocaust joke. I was wary of what his reaction would be, but to my surprise, he roared with laughter. It sounded like a laugh that was letting go of 2,000 years of exile, and it

occurred to me that maybe this is what Keret does in his work.

This kind of thing used to be done in Hebrew literature, before Zionism came and surgically removed our sense of humor. Now we're very serious and a very threatened people. The first thing people tend to say about Keret is that he's funny, and it's true, but he's funny in precisely this way, with a grim laugh in the face of horror.

When he published his first book and spoke in a language we understood, the idea was to deflate all the balloons and never blow them up again. As the years went by, he and his contemporaries were criticized for this – for not being ready to assume the portentous role of observer of the House of Israel.

But Keret didn't give in, and despite the passage of time, all the success and the translation of his books into more than 40 languages, he still writes short stories that sometimes make the reader laugh while getting him a little choked up. It's sort of like all those anarchist ladies and gentlemen who dare take out a cellophane-wrapped candy at the theater. The rustling of the wrapper causes the stern-faced person beside them to shift uncomfortably in his seat, as if the disturbance came from the unwrapping of a cyanide pill.

Cloning Hitler

What's in Keret's new story collection? One thing you notice is that the stories come from somebody who's out there in the world and no longer chained to names like Devora and Yosef. His protagonists might be called Pete-Pete and Todd, and they work in the cafeteria at Lincoln High, but sometimes they're called Lidor or Zvi and they're looking for an escape room to take their grandmother to on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The world is the same dark, absurd and uncompromising world where the kids and teens have become grown-ups who still don't know how to save themselves and their children from the horror; the parents are absent. Sometimes mothers die, sometimes fathers. Keret's world is that same world that lacks an organizing principle. Though maybe what's changed is that

now one could possibly point to a single overriding principle: the principle of orphanhood.

In the opening story, “The Second-to-Last Time I was Shot Out of a Cannon,” Esteban the human cannonball is too drunk to perform and a replacement must be found. When it’s suggested to the narrator that he take his place, he begs off, saying he has no experience. The circus manager begs to differ, pointing out that he has been shot out of a cannon before, and not just once but many times – for example, when his wife left him, or when his son called him a loser and said he never wanted to see him again.

In the next story – “Don’t Do It!” – a father and son notice a man standing on a rooftop and getting ready to jump, but each of them perceives the situation differently. The father wants to save the man while the son shouts encouragement, not yet aware of the possibility that someone could take his own life. He yells to the man to jump because he wants to see him fly – it’s not every day that you get to meet a real superhero.

In the story “Todd,” Todd asks his writer friend to write a story that will help him get girls to go to bed with him. The writer explains what a story is: “A story is not a magical incantation or hypnotherapy, a story is essentially a way to share with people something that you feel, something intimate, sometimes it’s even embarrassing that” – here the friend cuts him off. A story is just a story, Keret is telling us, still committed not to inflate any balloons.

In many of the stories, the father or mother is missing, having either run away or died or run away and died. Sometimes they’re just divorced, with wrecked families, single-parent families, orphaned children. In “Car Concentrate,” a 46-year-old man keeps a piece of compressed metal in his living room. It was once part of his father’s Mustang that got mixed up in a deadly accident. Sometimes the kids in Keret’s stories are small, and sometimes they’re 46-year-olds.

“What does your daughter do?,” the mother in “Crumb Cake” asks Charlie in Charlie’s Diner. The woman is there with her son to celebrate her 50th birthday. Charlie is impressed that, at his age, the son still wants to go out with his mother for her birthday. In answering her question, he says he doesn’t know exactly, something high-

tech. And the mother replies: “My son is fat and unemployed, so don’t be too quick to be jealous.”

In “Rabbit on My Father’s Side,” fathers leave home and return to their young children in the form of real white rabbits that can be petted behind the ear. And there are also stories about clones. In “Tabula Rasa,” Hitler is cloned so that a Holocaust survivor can kill him. Hitler doesn’t know that he’s a clone or that he’s Hitler. He is raised in harsh conditions, in captivity, and dreams of the day when he’ll be free. Does killing a clone count as murder? And what about murdering a Hitler who doesn’t know that he’s Hitler and has yet to harm anyone?

In “Yad Vashem,” a clear glass divider separates an exhibit about European Jewry before the Nazis came to power and one about Kristallnacht. A tourist named Eugene accidentally bumps into it. Blood drips from his nose as he views the exhibit with his wife Rachel. They’re going through a hard time, but not because of the Holocaust.

Interspersed with the stories is correspondence about the use of an escape room called “A Glitch at the Edge of the Galaxy” that a man named Michael Warshavsky wants to bring his mother to on Holocaust Remembrance Day. He’s informed in a letter from the place’s manager that the escape room is closed that day.

Undeterred, Warshavsky writes back that he’s trying “to find an appropriate activity for this sad and awful day,” adding that “the escape room has to do with the heavenly bodies, and, to the best of my knowledge, these did not deviate from their orbits even as 6 million Jews were sent to their deaths.” Which may have been why I thought about Holocaust jokes, and the joke I told to that American writer: A Jew arrives at the concentration camp and in the selection the Nazi orders him to go to the left, so the Jew asks – my left or yours?

A shattered culture

It will be interesting to see how Keret is perceived today by young readers, the ones for whom career isn’t a dirty word; for those who can afford it, a yuppie’s SUV is the natural choice. Keret still writes about people outside the bourgeois circle, about people whose lives have

shot them out of a cannon. He doesn't write beautifully, he's not making love to the language, he doesn't know what's right and what's good and how it's supposed to be. Despite all his success, he remains faithful to his generation and in this sense he hasn't changed; some would say that he hasn't grown up – compared to the rest of us who've betrayed all we used to be and can now be found spouting gibberish on Facebook and at Botox parties.

Keret doesn't preach, he doesn't judge, he just tells a story. Some people might think this is just more of the same, but what's this thing that's the same and has it really not changed? Keret has the ability to see things both from a bird's-eye view and from the vantage point of the refrigerator. He knows what's in the single guy's fridge and the married couple's fridge. He also knows what's in the war's fridge, the family's fridge, the parents' fridge and the orphan's fridge. He knows the farewell fridge and the compromise fridge.

Maybe a story is just a story, but a story is also a cunning act, certainly when it comes to Keret. It seems to me that since his first books, the laughter has changed and sometimes vanished completely. The story that concludes the collection, "The Evolution of Separation," describes a cell that becomes a pepper that becomes a fish that becomes a lizard that becomes a creature that walks upright that becomes a loving couple laughing and watching television together. And then their parents die and they have a child who grows up and goes off to college and they're left alone and grow nasty to each other and cheat on each other and find replacements for each other. And then they break down and crash, and the man notices that he's speaking in the plural when he's all alone.

Here we have a story that's not just about the evolution of separation between people, but also a depiction of the evolution of a culture still crushed and trampled on, and here Keret offers no words of comfort or the merest hint of a joke. And that's what has changed.



Maya Sela, Haaretz Contributor. Haaretz

Gangsters vs. Nazis

How the Jewish mob fought American admirers of the Third Reich

By Robert Rockaway

Emboldened by Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, and fueled by the Great Depression, anti-Semitism increased throughout the United States, and over 100 anti-Semitic organizations sprung up across the country. They had names like the Friends of the New Germany (Nazi Bund), the Silver Shirts, Defenders of the Christian Faith, the Christian Front, and the Knights of the White Camellia, among others. Protected by the constitution's First Amendment, they held public rallies, paraded through the streets in their uniforms carrying Nazi flags, published scurrilous magazines, and openly flaunted their hatred for Jews. American Jews were intimidated and frightened. Fearful of stirring up even more anti-Jewish sentiment, the American Jewish establishment's response was often tentative and cautionary. They worried that what happened in Germany, home to Europe's elite Jewish community, could easily happen in America. One group of American Jews who had no compunctions about meeting the anti-Semites head-on were Jewish gangsters. Not bound by conventional rules and constitutional legalities, they took direct and violent action against the Jew haters.

Nazi Bund rallies in New York City in the late 1930s created a terrible dilemma for the city's Jewish leaders. With 20,000 members, the Nazi Bund was the largest anti-Semitic group in the nation. They organized large public rallies and marched to drumbeats wearing brown shirts and swastikas, and carrying Nazi flags. Jewish leaders wanted the meetings stopped, but could not do so legally. Nathan Perlman, a judge and former Republican congressman, was one Jewish leader who believed that the Jews should demonstrate more militancy. In 1935, he surreptitiously contacted Meyer Lansky, a leading organized crime figure born on the 4th of July, and asked him to help. Lansky related to me what followed.

Perlman assured Lansky that money and legal assistance would be put at his disposal. The only stipulation was that no Nazis be killed. They

could be beaten up, but not terminated. Lansky reluctantly agreed. No killing. Always very sensitive about anti-Semitism, Lansky was acutely aware of what the Nazis were doing to Jews. "I was a Jew and I felt for those Jews in Europe who were suffering," he said. "They were my brothers." Lansky refused the judge's offer of money and assistance, but he did make one request. He asked Perlman to ensure that after he went into action he would not be criticized by the Jewish press. The judge promised to do what he could.

Lansky rounded up some of his tough associates and went around New York disrupting Nazi meetings. Young Jews not connected to him or the rackets also volunteered to help, and Lansky and others taught them how to use their fists and handle themselves in a fight. Lansky's crews worked very professionally. Nazi arms, legs, and ribs were broken and skulls cracked, but no one died. The attacks continued for more than a year. And Lansky earned quite a reputation for doing this work.

Lansky later described to an Israeli journalist one of the onslaughts in Yorkville, the German neighborhood in northeast Manhattan:

"We got there in the evening and found several hundred people dressed in their brown shirts. The stage was decorated with a swastika and pictures of Hitler. The speaker started ranting. There were only 15 of us, but we went into action. We attacked them in the hall and threw some of them out the windows. There were fist fights all over the place. Most of the Nazis panicked and ran out. We chased them and beat them up, and some of them were out of action for months. Yes it was violence. We wanted to teach them a lesson. We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults."

Reflecting on his role in these episodes to me, he fumed that he helped the Jewish community, but all he got for his trouble was abuse. He believed the city's Jewish leaders were pleased with his actions, but they failed to stop the Jewish press from condemning him. When the newspapers reported on the anti-Bund incidents, they referred to Lansky and his friends as "the Jewish gangsters." This infuriated him. "They wanted the Nazis taken care of but were afraid to do the job themselves," he said. "I did it for them. And when it was over they called me a gangster. No one ever called me a gangster until Rabbi

Wise [Stephen Wise] and the Jewish leaders called me that."

'We went over there and grabbed everything in sight—all their bullshit signs—and smacked the shit out of them.'

Judd Teller, a reporter for a New York Jewish daily, relates how he met one day with "several men who said they were from 'Murder, Incorporated' and wanted a list of 'Nazi bastards who should be rubbed out.'" Teller took the request to Jewish communal leaders. They told Teller that if the plan would be put in motion, "the police would be informed promptly." Teller relayed this warning to his Murder, Inc. contact. Upon hearing this, the mobster angrily replied, "Tell them to keep their shirts on. OK, we won't ice [murder] the bodies; only marinate them." According to Teller, this is exactly what they did. He said the attacks by the Jewish mobsters was sufficient "marination" to drastically reduce attendance at Nazi Bund meetings, and discouraged Bundists "from appearing in uniform singly in the streets."

After a series of attacks, the Bundists protested having their meetings violently broken up and asked Mayor Fiorello La Guardia for protection from the Jewish mobsters. La Guardia agreed under certain conditions. The Bundists could not wear their uniforms, sing their songs, display the swastika and Nazi flag, and could not march to beating drums. The Bundists agreed to his terms. La Guardia confined their parades to Yorkville and assigned Jewish and African-American policemen to patrol the route. Thereafter, any Nazi dignitary passing through New York was assured of a mixed Jewish and black bodyguard detail.

The Nazi Bund was also active across the river in Newark, New Jersey, which had a large German-American community. As a Jew, Abner "Longie" Zwillman, who bossed the rackets in that city, was not about to allow the Nazis to operate with impunity in his territory. In 1934, he turned to Nat Arno, a Jewish ex-prizefighter, and asked him to organize an anti-Nazi group. Arno recruited tough Newark Jews and ex-boxers, and the group called itself The Minutemen. They borrowed the name from the Minutemen of Revolutionary War fame. The original Minutemen got their name because they were expected to be ready to fight the British at a minute's notice. Newark's Jewish Minutemen

wanted to emulate them in their fight against the Nazis.

The Minutemen saw to it that no Nazi Bund meetings would be held in the New Jersey area, particularly in Newark and the small towns surrounding it. Arno and his men monitored the movement of the Nazis and, after finding out where their meetings were held, would break them up. Arno had financial and political support in these forays from Longie Zwillman. In those days, Longie controlled Newark's police. Whenever the Bund met, the police informed Longie of the time and place and conveniently abandoned their posts so the Nazis were left unguarded.

With Zwillman's encouragement, one of his prime enforcers, Max "Puddy" Hinkes, joined the group. The Minutemen's most famous exploit occurred in Schwabbenhalle on Springfield Avenue bordering the German neighborhood in Irvington. According to Hinkes:

"The Nazi scumbags were meeting one night on the second floor. Nat Arno and I went upstairs and threw stink bombs into the room where the creeps were. As they came out of the room, running from the horrible odor of the stink bombs and running down the steps to escape to go into the street to escape, our boys were waiting with bats and iron bars. It was like running a gauntlet. Our boys were lined up on both sides and we started hitting, aiming for their heads or any other parts of their bodies with our bats and iron bars. The Nazis were screaming blue murder. It was one of the most happy [sic] moments of my life. It was too bad we didn't kill them all. In other places we couldn't get inside, so we smashed windows and destroyed their cars, which were parked outside. The Nazis begged for police help and protection, however the police favored us."

Heshie Weiner, another participant in the fracas, remembers that one of the Nazis who came running down the stairs, had the indiscretion to shout "Heil" and was met by a chorus of iron pipes. Weiner claims that after this attack, "I never heard any more of Bund meetings by the Nazis in our area."

In Chicago, blond-and-blue-eyed Herb Brin, who worked as a crime reporter for the City Press, joined the local Nazi party as a spy for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of the B'nai B'rith. He told me, "I joined the Nazi party at the Hausfaterland on Western Avenue across from

Riverview Park. It was a hotbed of Nazi activity," he recalled. From 1938 through 1939, Brin kept the ADL informed about Nazi activities. What the ADL did not know was that he fed information about Nazi marches and rallies to Jewish gangsters. "I marched with the Nazis," said Brin, "but I came back later with Jewish gangs and we beat them up good."

Minneapolis, Minnesota was also a center of anti-Semitism during the 1930s, except here the problem was William Dudley Pelley's pro-Nazi Silver Shirt Legion. A California native, Pelley was a former screenwriter, crime reporter, novelist, and magazine journalist. He hated President Roosevelt and wanted to rescue America from an international Jewish-communist conspiracy. Pelley claimed he created the Silver Shirts to "save America as Mussolini and his black shirts saved Italy and as Hitler and his brown shirts saved Germany."

Minneapolis had a long history of anti-Semitism and was one of the few American cities to bar Jews from service clubs such as the Rotaries, Kiwanis, and Lions, and civic welfare organizations. Because of Minneapolis' anti-Jewish tradition, Pelley felt it would be easy to gain a foothold there. At the time, the city's gambling czar was David Berman, an associate and sometimes rival of Isidore "Kid Cann" Blumenfeld, the head of an all-Jewish crime syndicate.

According to Berman's daughter, Susan, Berman despised anti-Semites and determined to destroy the Silver Shirts. He found out where the Silver Shirts met and prepared his men for a raid. Meanwhile he notified his men that the next time he heard about a meeting, they were going to break it up. A call came one evening to Berman's bookmaking operation in the Radisson Hotel. The caller informed Berman of a meeting of Silver Shirts at 8 o'clock that evening at the Elks Lodge. Berman immediately called his men. "Be at the office at 7 p.m. and bring anybody and everything you've got," he said. When his men arrived, Berman distributed brass knuckles and clubs. He and his men then drove in a convoy of Cadillacs to the Elks Lodge and waited for the right moment to attack.

As soon as the Silver Shirt leader mounted the podium and began shouting for an end to "all the Jew bastards in this city," Berman's lookout signaled to him. Berman and his men charged

through the door and began beating every Silver Shirt within reach. The meeting turned into pandemonium, with the audience screaming and running for the exits followed by every Silver Shirt still able to stand. The attack lasted 10 minutes. When it was over, Berman, his suit covered with blood, took the microphone. "This is a warning," he said in a cold controlled voice. "Anybody who says anything against Jews gets the same treatment. Only next time it will be worse." He then took out a pistol and fired a shot into the air. He and his men then left the hall. It took two more such attacks to frighten off the Silver Shirts. Berman and Blumenfeld paid off the police and there were never any arrests connected with the incident.

The Silver Shirts and Nazi Bundists were also active on the West Coast, especially in Los Angeles. Although few in number, they were noisy and brazen and alarmed the city's Jewish community. During the height of Nazi activity in the summer of 1938, West Coast mobster Mickey Cohen was serving a short sentence in the Los Angeles county jail. He happened to be sitting in the bullpen (the barred enclosure where prisoners are kept temporarily) waiting to go to court, when Robert Noble, a notorious local Nazi Bundist, and another Nazi were brought in for questioning. Cohen knew what Noble was and Noble knew who Cohen was. The police made the mistake of sitting the anti-Semites near Cohen and leaving them alone.

In his memoir, Cohen tells what then happened. The two Nazis tried to move away but Cohen grabbed them before they could. "I started bouncing their heads together," he recalled. "With the two of them, you'd think they'd put up a fight, but they didn't do nothing. So I'm going over them pretty good. The windup is that they're climbing up on the bars, both of them, and I'm trying to pull them down. Now they're screaming and hollering so much everybody thinks it's a riot," said Cohen.

The noise and tumult brought the police on the run. By this time Mickey had moved back to his seat and was nonchalantly reading a newspaper. The officer in charge went over to Cohen and demanded to know what happened. "What are you asking me for," said Cohen. "I'm sitting here reading the newspaper. Them two guys got into a fight with each other. I don't know what happened. I didn't want to mix in with them."

After he was released, Cohen enjoyed telling his friends how good he felt about beating up anti-Semites.

As news of the incident spread, Cohen began getting calls from Jewish organizations and leaders asking him to help them oppose the Nazis. One of his callers was a Jewish judge who informed Mickey about a Nazi Bund meeting. "I told him all right, don't worry about it," said Cohen. Cohen gathered together some of his Jewish mobster friends and raided the Nazi meeting. "We went over there and grabbed everything in sight—all their bullshit signs—and smacked the shit out of them, broke them up as best we could," said Cohen. "Nobody could pay me for this work. It was my patriotic duty. There ain't no amount of money to buy them kind of things," he said.

What did Jewish communal leaders think about this? Publicly they evinced shame and horror at the criminal activities and notoriety of the gangsters because they epitomized the "bad Jew," the evildoer who would bring hatred on the whole community. Privately they appreciated the mobsters who boldly took action against the Nazis and anti-Semites. Although the gangsters may have distressed the Jewish establishment, they did earn the admiration of the Jewish man-on-the-street, especially among Jewish youngsters. Talk show host Larry King admitted that when he was growing up in Brooklyn, "Jewish gangsters were our heroes. Even the bad ones were heroes to us." The 1930s were a time fraught with danger for Jews. For some Jewish mobsters, it proved to be a time when they could do something positive to protect their community from Nazis and anti-Semites.



Robert Rockaway is professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University, and the author of *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters*.
Tablet

Portrait of a Fat Jew

'Flesh,' Brigid Brophy's reissued 1960s novel of middle-class intellectuals, is a psychosexual, art-historical, Rubenesque frolic through English anti-Semitism and suppressed sexuality

By Josh Friedlander

Jewish culture, mainly of the Eastern European flavor, has long become an inseparable part of America's imaginative and comedic landscape. But England is different: It is a land in which exuberance of any kind is frowned upon, where the worst form of public rudeness is to stand out. England never imagined itself to be a nation of refugees. Uppermost in the minds of British Jews was the need to blend in. As a result, Jewish life has only rarely found expression in English literature, and when it has come, it has often been oblique, as in the ambiguously Jewish characters of Anita Brookner, or W.G. Sebald's Jacques Austerlitz: intellectual, quiet, vaguely Semitic.

That desire to keep a low profile is perfectly skewered in Brigid Brophy's 1962 novella [Flesh](#), an arch, subversive tale of marriage and out-of-control obesity in North London. Little known outside of the United Kingdom and out of print for some years, it is a hidden gem of British-Jewish literature. Brophy, who would have been 89 on Tuesday (June 12, 2018), was a puckish and brilliant writer who wrote on a plethora of themes, frequently returning to a triad of opera, sexuality, and psychoanalysis. She started a classics degree at Oxford but was expelled after less than a year. "I came down at the age of 19 without a degree and with a consequent sense of nudity which I have never quite overcome," she claimed, but she quickly leaped to the forefront of the intellectual scene in Swinging London. She corresponded frequently with the literary stars of the age, wrote cutting book reviews and critical appreciations, and was an activist for an eclectic range of causes.

Flesh was the author's second novel after *Hackenfeller's Ape*, an utterly Brophian story about a scientist singing Mozart to a caged ape to encourage him to procreate. A superficially tamer tale about art and gender roles, *Flesh* revolved around a pair of self-abnegating, middle-class Jewish intellectuals. The first, Marcus, is a shy and awkward young man, educated but aimless, and coddled to the point of uselessness by his doting immigrant parents. Although he does possess one true gift—an aesthetic sense bordering on obsession, a delight in the beautiful and

sensual "to the point of agony"—he seems doomed to keep it to himself. He drifts through life on the coattails of his more socially accomplished sister, sure that people do not want him around but unwilling to make a scene by leaving. It is at one such event, "hemmed in by other people's backs and jammed in a corner between a bookcase and a table of food," uncomfortably holding a glass he has nowhere to put down, that he meets Nancy.

Nancy, confident and worldly, brushes over Marcus' social clumsiness with ease. We learn little about her (Marcus' appearance is described in depth; Nancy's not at all), but she is intellectually his superior. She studied at the LSE, taught violin, and speaks excellent French. She is sexually experienced. The division of labor is clear: "where [Marcus] was aesthetic, Nancy was intelligent." Nancy's background is slightly posher than Marcus'. Her father is known to the neighbors as the Commander (he "seems to have spent the war being brave," as she puts it), and her parents belong to a "much higher—and freer—social class." Without any kind of courtship, they begin to spend more time together, to the great relief of Marcus' immigrant family, who feel at sea in England (they appear to have come from Germany some time before the war) but possess an almost religious veneration toward their son.

As Nancy's influence on Marcus grows, he begins to change spiritually and physiologically. His speech becomes slower but more self-assured. He begins to smoke and drink and put on weight. Part of this is his new sense of belonging with Nancy at his side—she teaches him how to dance, and soothes his anxiety during the thorny first night of their honeymoon in Italy, replacing his nerves with a rush of virile achievement. But it is also dissipation born of happiness, a rejection of his past failed life as a Jewish intellectual: Now he is closer to Falstaff than Bernard Berenson.

At all times, the social ramifications of Jewishness are present. Nancy and Marcus both yearn to escape from North London, where the houses all smell of the same furniture polish; when they purchase a flat from a couple in Chelsea, Marcus sees "that Nancy was displeased that they were Jews." In a terrific scene that embodies the book's tone, Nancy enters the drawing room to see Marcus kneeling with his face in a take-home work project, a green silk chinoiserie bought for appraisal. Nancy tells him "in the traditional manner of a Victorian lady receiving a proposal of marriage from a physically repugnant suitor ... 'You look like an old Jew merchant,'" to which he replies, "I *am* an old Jew merchant." Nancy's austere gaze places her husband into a tradition she would be free of: the wheedling, shiftless Jewish peddler, unable or unwilling to shake the otherness of his Oriental descent.

Marcus' great love is art, and his favorite painter is Rubens, the Flemish Baroque master inextricable from the "great blond areas of flesh" (in Marcus' words) he lends his name to. Nancy and Marcus mention his paintings of *The Judgment of Paris*—in which the Trojan hero appraises three goddesses—as they consider prospective au pairs. Rubens' brush, along with the viewer's eye, lingers over their nude bodies, rippling and ruddy, a stark contrast to the centerfold exoticism of, say, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, yet still clearly present as objects of desire, the vanguard of an early modern shift from the classical to the demotic.

In the latter part of his career, Rubens married his 16-year-old niece Helena, a renowned beauty, and produced one of his most [unusual, intimate paintings](#), in which his young bride poses naked except for "Het Pelsken," a fur coat. This portrait of conjugal love is highly unusual by the standards of the time, a nude not symbolically "clothed" by classical or biblical signifiers. Brophy's great manipulation of this art historical trope is to reverse it, foregrounding the female gaze on an undulating, sexualized male body. From the moment he is engaged to Nancy, his body begins to fill out, and by the novel's close Nancy is surprised to discover her husband—all corpulent, naked mass—still desirable. "Just look at yourself," she says. "Look at your thighs. Look at your chest. You've got great pendulous breasts, like a woman." Marcus is unperturbed. "It's a process of empathy. I've become a Rubens woman."

On some level, Rubens' slightly later Baroque peer Rembrandt might be his very counterpoint. In place of bright colors and fleshy bodies, Rembrandt painted lined, blotched faces in dim browns and ochres, and opted for commonplace portraits rather than classical figures. It's telling that after Marcus' father dies, he briefly contemplates taking over the family dried-fruit business, but Nancy bristles. When Marcus suggests that prunes and raisins might in their own way be *objets d'art* ("they have a resemblance, you know, to certain faces of Rembrandt"), she counters, "You're a Rubens man, not a Rembrandt man." Marcus' transformation will go only one way, toward the more "gentile" Rubens.

Flesh toys constantly with such symbolism, but is thin on dispositive statements. It's clear, for example, that it is about gender in some sense; yet it isn't fundamentally misandric. At the book's core is the fluidity and subjectivity of bodies; and the contours of Rubens women, a symbol of aestheticism, decadence, and feminine ideation. Marcus dons traditional femininity in his passive role in the relationship, and his objectification, but never do we sense that this is something he's uncomfortable with. Brophy herself had an open marriage with the art historian Michael Levey ("Why Wed at All?" was *People* magazine's

[take on it](#) in 1974), and was openly bisexual. "The cure for sexual jealousy," she said, "is sexual generosity." It seems reasonable to read at least some biographical information into *Flesh*. "So very much of Marcus is my father, and he was always assumed to be Jewish, with Levey as a surname," Brophy's daughter Kate told me by email. (He was in fact Irish Catholic.)

It's easier to convey this book's strangeness than its style and wicked humor, and it is the latter that make Brophy's writing so hard to analyze. For European Jews in the early 1960s, the recent past contained a lot of trauma that was still taboo. There are some references to this in *Flesh*: Marcus doesn't want to hire a German au pair, even if, as Nancy points out, "the sort of girl we'd get was only 5 or 6 in 1945."

How much of the Jewish self-loathing contained in this book can be read as a dark, oblique glimpse at a community afraid to be Jewish, how much as simple parody? With Brophy's ironic nature in mind, it is tempting to say that *Flesh* is essentially a jape, a feminist novel of tables turned, with the characters' Jewish identity a diverting side plot. Yet there is a certain daring in Brophy—the vegetarian and animal-rights activist, the bohemian and nonconformist—peeking inside and writing the anxieties and contradictions of London Jews just 20 years after the Holocaust, painting them in a way that perhaps only an outsider could.

Josh Friedlander is a writer living in Tel Aviv.



Brigid Brophy (1929-1995) was an acclaimed novelist, essayist, critic and campaigner. Her fiction included *Hackenfeller's Ape* (1953), *The King of a Rainy Country* (1956), *Flesh* (1962), *The Finishing Touch* (1963), *The Snow Ball* (1964), *In Transit* (1969), *The Adventures of God in His Search for the Black Girl* (1971) and *Palace without Chairs* (1978).

Her non-fiction included *Black Ship to Hell* (1962), *Mozart the Dramatist* (1964), two books about Aubrey Beardsley - *Black and White* (1968) and *Beardsley and His World* (1976), and *Prancing Novelist: In Praise Of Ronald Firbank* (1973).

In 1954 she married the art historian Michael Levey (later the director of the British National Gallery from 1973-1987, knighted in 1981). The couple had one daughter, Kate. Brophy was a noted campaigner on several platforms, in particular her fight to establish an authors' Public Lending Right and her vice-presidency of the National Anti-Vivisection Society. *Tablet*

Why Democrats are Turning Anti-Israel

By Caroline Glick

Since President Donald Trump entered the White House, hardly a day has gone by without Israel receiving a warning from a Democratic politician or a liberal American Jewish leader that it had better curb its enthusiasm and be reticent in its support for Trump and his policies.

The partisan split is clear. A Pew survey of American support for Israel in January noted a great and growing gap in partisan support for the Jewish state. 79 percent of Republicans support Israel against the Palestinians. Only 27 percent of Democrats do.

The latest warning came this week. Ambassador Dennis Ross, the former U.S. mediator for the peace talks between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), told the *Jerusalem Post* that Israel needs to watch out.

“Given the strong opposition by Democrats to Trump,” Ross warned, “Israel risks getting caught up in that conflict,” he told the *Post*.

“There will be a post-Trump U.S. ... Israel risks a backlash because the Trump administration has caused such deep alienation among Democrats, so it’s very important that there is outreach by Israel to Democrats.”

Ross also had advice for what Israelis should talk about when they talk to Americans. Israelis, he said, should avoid talking about shared values and visions of the world. Instead, they should focus their discussions with Americans on both sides of the aisle on security issues and regional Middle East topics.

Ross’s warning that Israelis should avoid speaking to Americans about shared values points to the core of Israel’s problem with Democrats — and, increasingly, with the American Jewish community which splits two-to-one in support for Democrats over Republicans.

For the better part of the history of U.S.-Israel relations, the main source of U.S. support for Israel was not shared security interests — although those shared interests are legion, and have ensured that ties between the countries have always been intense and largely cooperative.

The basic affinity between Americans and Israelis that informed their joint interests has always been our shared values. More precisely, Zionism — that is, Jewish nationalism — and American nationalism share basic features that draw them together.

Both Israel and the U.S. are states based on ideals and ideas rooted in the Bible. Jewish identity and attachment to the land of Israel, like Jewish survival through two thousand years of exile and homelessness, owe entirely to the faithfulness of Jewish people scattered throughout the world to the laws of Moses and to their national identity as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This enduring attachment to Jewish law and heritage, and to national identity, is what brought millions of Jews to settle in the land of Israel both before and after the State of Israel was founded 70 years ago.

The Jews who have come to Israel from the four corners of the globe were not entering a foreign land as economic migrants. They were exiles returning home. Israel is not a nation of immigrants so much as a state populated by immigrated Jewish exiles.

Likewise, as Michael Anton wrote this week, contrary to the pro-open borders position, the U.S. is not a nation of immigrants. It is a nation built by settlers.

Anton defines a settler as someone who “builds *ex nihilo* and must form the initial social compact,” of a society.

Anton’s definition isn’t precise, at least in the case of the early settlers in the British colonies. The social compact they forged, which was later revised in the form of the U.S. Constitution, was not built from nothing. It was founded on the Bible. The Biblical laws and narratives formed the basis of enlightenment concepts like limited government, individual liberty, and freedom of religion, which in turn formed the basis of the American social compact.

Anton argued that an immigrant, in general, is not a free-floating individual who happens to fall where he falls. Rather, an immigrant is someone who “seeks to join a society already built, to join a compact already made.”

In the case of the United States, the compact that centuries of immigrants joined was anchored in the Constitution and the philosophical and religious positions that inform it. The civic religion that emerged in the U.S. was inclusive to those who accepted its basic values and principles.

Given that the social compacts of both Israel and the U.S. were forged by settlers informed by the Bible, it is little wonder that the two nations have always had a natural affinity for one another. Which brings us back to Ross’s warning.

The problem that Israel now faces with the Democrats is that whereas Israelis have by and large remained faithful to their identity — and consequently, their nationalism, or Zionism — Democrats are increasingly becoming post-nationalist. The distinction between nationalist and post-nationalist is not a mere policy preference. It is a far more fundamental shift in values.

Consider the situation along Israel's border with Syria.

For the past two weeks, as the Russian-Syrian-Iranian advance against rebel-held southwestern Syria has proceeded, some 270,000 Syrians have fled their homes in Deraa and Quneitra provinces. While the bulk of the displaced have fled to the Syrian-Jordanian border, several thousand have situated themselves along Syria's border with Israel.

In Israel, there is all but consensual support for the government's position, stated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his weekly cabinet meeting Sunday. Netanyahu said, "Regarding southern Syria, we will continue to defend our borders. We will extend humanitarian assistance to the extent of our abilities. We will not allow entry into our territory." That is, Israelis are committed to being good neighbors to the Syrians.

Despite the formal state of war between the two countries, and the fact that almost all of the warring factions share a basic commitment to Israel's annihilation, Israelis are happy to provide medical assistance to the wounded, and humanitarian assistance to the refugees on the border. But they are not prepared to grant asylum to anyone. This position is shared by all political parties across the right-left divide, except for the post-Zionist (or post-nationalist) party Meretz.

Meretz, which represents some 4 percent of the electorate, opposes the very notion of Jewish nationalism, or Zionism. It believes that Israel should open its doors – as a Jewish state – to refugees and others, including illegal economic migrants from Africa.

Meretz's leader, Tamar Zandberg, knows that her party has no significant support domestically. And so she has focused a great deal of effort on building strong ties to Democrats and to progressive, anti-nationalist American Jewish groups to increase her party's power and leverage in Israel.

Zandberg recognizes that her position, while marginal in Israel, is the dominant position in the American left generally and in the Democratic Party specifically. It is also an increasingly popular position in the American Jewish community.

Ambassador Ross was in Israel this week to attend the presentation of the Jewish People Policy Institute's 2018 annual report. He serves as co-chairman of the institute's board of directors. The report emphasized the importance of preserving the triangular relationship between Israel, American Jewry, and Washington.

The problem is that over the past twenty years or so, the American left has undergone a profound shift in values, from liberal nationalism to radical post-nationalism. This process, facilitated and accelerated during Barack Obama's presidency, and expressed

most emblematically in Democratic support for open borders, has made post-nationalism the *sine qua non* of the Democrats since Trump's electoral triumph in 2016.

Israel's relations with the American left, then, are a collateral victim of a wider shift in American society. Jewish nationalism, with its inherent affinity to American nationalism, was once the basis of Israel's relationship with the American people as a whole. But now nationalism is the main cause of the Democrats' increasingly fraught and antagonistic relationship with the Jewish state, while remaining the foundation of ever increasing levels of Republican affinity and support for Israel.

Perhaps Israel will be able to heed Ross's advice, at least in terms of the Democrats. Perhaps it will be able to develop a common language with the U.S. based on shared interests. There are certainly a number of steps Israel can take to advance that goal.

But the fact is that the Democrats' shift in values from nationalist to post-nationalist, rather than any action Israel has taken in its domestic or foreign policy, is what has caused the rupture in Israel's ties to the American left.

So long as Meretz remains a marginal force in Israeli society on the one hand, and post-nationalist forces continue to rise in the Democratic party on the other, bipartisan support for Israel, like bipartisan support for American nationalism, will remain a thing of the past.

Jerusalem Post



Caroline Glick

Newspaper editor, journalist, writer

Russia Constrains Iran

By Dore Gold

In an astounding series of statements, Russia has made it clear that it expects all foreign forces to withdraw from Syria. Alexander Lavrentiev, President Putin's envoy to Syria, specified on May 18, 2018, that all "foreign forces" meant those forces belonging to Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Hizbullah.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov added this week that only Syrian troops should have a presence on the country's southern border, close to Jordan and Israel. Previously, Russia had been a party to the establishment of a "de-escalation zone" in southwestern Syria along with the United States and Jordan. Now, Russian policy was becoming more ambitious. Lavrov added that a pullback of all non-Syrian forces from the de-escalation zone had to be fast.

The regime in Tehran got the message and issued a sharp rebuke of its Russian ally. The Iranians did not see their deployment in Syria as temporary. Five years ago, a leading religious figure associated with the Revolutionary Guards declared that Syria was the 35th province of Iran. Besides such ideological statements, on a practical level, Syria hosts the logistical network for Iranian resupply of its most critical Middle Eastern proxy force, Hizbullah, which has acquired significance beyond the struggle for Lebanon.

Over the years, Hizbullah has become involved in military operations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and elsewhere. Without Syria, Iran's ability to project power and influence in an assortment of Middle Eastern conflicts would be far more constrained. Syria has become pivotal for Tehran's quest for a land corridor linking Iran's western border to the Mediterranean. The fact that Iran was operating ten military bases in Syria made its presence appear to be anything but temporary.

Already in February 2018, the first public signs of discord between Russia and Iran became visible. At the Valdai Conference in Moscow, attended by both Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (and by this author), the Russian Foreign Minister articulated his strong differences with the Iranians over their pronouncements regarding Israel: "We have stated many times that we won't accept the statements that Israel, as a Zionist state, should be destroyed and wiped off the map. I believe this is an absolutely wrong way to advance one's own interests."

Iran was hardly a perfect partner for Russia. True, some Russian specialists argued that Moscow's problems with Islamic militancy emanated from the

jihadists of Sunni Islam, but not from Shiite Islam, which had been dominant in Iran since the 16th century. But that was a superficial assessment. Iran was also backing Palestinian Sunni militants like Islamic Jihad and Hamas. This May, Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, told a pro-Hizbullah television channel that he had regular contacts with Tehran.

Iran Supports both Shiites and Sunnis

Iran was also supporting other Sunni organizations like the Taliban and the Haqqani network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It harbored senior leaders from al-Qaeda. Indeed, when the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, sought a regional sanctuary after the fall of Afghanistan to the United States, he did not flee to Pakistan, but instead, he moved to Iran. There is no reason why Iran could not provide critical backing for Russia's adversaries in the future.

But that was not the perception in Moscow when Russia gave its initial backing for the Iranian intervention in Syria. In the spring of 2015, Moscow noted that the security situation in Central Asia was deteriorating, as internal threats to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan were increasing. On top of all this, the Islamic State (IS) was making its debut in Afghanistan. An IS victory in Syria would have implications for the security of the Muslim-populated areas of Russia itself.¹

It was in this context that Russia dramatically increased arms shipments to its allies in Syria. It also coordinated with Iran the deployment of thousands of Shiite fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan under the command of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). That also meant the construction of an expanded military infrastructure on Syrian soil for this Shiite foreign legion.

At the same time, Russia maintained and upgraded a naval base at the Syrian city of Tartus and an air facility at the Khmeimim Air Base near Latakia. Moscow also had access to other Syrian facilities as well.

Russia Achieved Its Main Goal and Changed Its Policy

What changed in Moscow? It appears that the Kremlin began to understand that Iran handicapped Russia's ability to realize its interests in the Middle East. The Russians had secured many achievements with their Syrian policy since 2015. They had constructed a considerable military presence that included air and sea ports under their control in Syria. They had demonstrated across the Middle East that they were not prepared to sell out their client, President Bashar Assad, no matter how repugnant his military policies had become – including the repeated use of chemical weapons against his own civilian population. The Russians successfully converted their

political reliability into a diplomatic asset, which the Arabs contrasted with the Obama administration's poor treatment of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt at the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. However, now Iran was putting Russia's achievements at risk through a policy of escalation with Israel.

The Russian security establishment appeared to understand from the start that Israel's strategy in Syria was essentially defensive. For example, Israel wanted to prevent the delivery of weapons to Hizbullah that could alter the military balance in its favor. One feature of Russian military policy at a very early stage was the *carte blanche* Moscow appeared to give Israel to strike at these weapons deliveries and later at Iranian facilities across Syria.

According to one report, a Moscow think tank, closely identified with President Putin, published a commentary blaming Iran for the deteriorating situation between Iran and Israel in the Syrian theater. The Sunni Arab states, which Russia was courting, were also voicing their concerns with growing Iranian activism. Undoubtedly, the Russians noticed the complaints that came from Tajikistan this year that Iran was seeking to destabilize the country by funding militant Islamists.



Russian President Putin meets with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mohammed Khatami in 2015 (Kremlin)

Putin seemed to have growing reservations about Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic revolution from the soil of Syria. Now, with IS fundamentally vanquished, Iranian military activity in Syria lost its primary justification. And if Moscow was considering to more closely coordinate its Middle Eastern policy with Washington in the future, it needed to adjust its approach to Iran.²

On May 22, 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo listed aspects of Iranian activism which the United States was now demanding that Iran halt. It was not surprising to see in Pompeo's list the demand

that "Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety [of] Syria."

Russia is not cutting its ties with Iran. But it is clearly cutting back Iran's freedom of action in Syria. The idea that Russia would back Iran's use of Syria as a platform for operations against Israel or Jordan is not tenable. Still, Russia would remain the primary supplier of Bashar Assad's army in Syria as well as his strategic partner. Unquestionably, Iran would need to reassess its Middle Eastern strategy after Moscow's pronouncements calling for it to leave Syria and not continue to be perceived as the force that put at risk all that Russia had achieved as a result of the Syrian civil war.

Notes

¹ Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2018, pp. 58-59.

² M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia Censures Iran, Expects Israel to Help Restore Ties with US," *Asia Times*, June 1, 2018.



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Homage to Lanzmann

The 'Shoah' filmmaker, who died last month at age 92, would not look away

By Paul Berman

Claude Lanzmann's special genius was a spectacular brusqueness, which allowed him to reveal, as if with no effort at all, the patterns of thought that protect enormities under a cloak of niceties. Sometimes he was faintly droll and mordant in how he went about doing this. Everyone who has seen the 9 1/2 hours of *Shoah* will remember the scene in which an old SS Unterscharführer at Treblinka named Franz Suchomel, who does not know that he is on camera, agrees to recount his history at the camp and says, "But don't use my name." Lanzmann replies, "No, I promised. All right, you've arrived at Treblinka. ..." The Unterscharführer begins to speak—and, in subtitles on the screen, his name and identity appear.

It is a little shocking to see the subtitles. You wonder for a flicker of an instant if you aren't watching a crime take place, which is Lanzmann's baldfaced lie to the old Nazi. But then, in that same flicker of an instant, you do recognize, if you have half a brain, that the crime in this particular case belongs to the Nazi, and not to the man interviewing the Nazi. You might even find yourself shocked to have been shocked—shocked to have been confused even for a micromoment about the rights and wrongs of manipulating an old SS man into revealing the scale of his criminality. Does the micromomentary confusion overshadow what the Nazi recounts? Maybe it does, for its own micromoment. I notice that right now I am recounting the amusing story of Lanzmann's deception, instead of the realities of Treblinka—where, I should add, my grandfather's innumerable cousins were murdered, quite probably at the direction of the Unterscharführer whose face is identified on screen. But there is something to be gained from having undergone an instant of confusion, so long as you give it some thought. You have had a collaborator's experience, in a specific version—the experience of believing that researching a mass extermination is fine and good, but other considerations ought to take precedence.

In his memoir, *The Patagonian Hare*, Lanzmann recounts a slapstick version of the same deception. He and a colleague persuaded an old SS man with a much higher rank, Obersturmführer Heinz Schubert, from the family of the 19th-century composer, to speak to

them about the war years, and they brought along a secret camera, concealed in a bag, into Schubert's villa. The camera was an elaborate device that transmitted images and sounds to a larger machine, which itself was concealed in a minivan down the block, manned by a couple of additional members of Lanzmann's team. Only, the volume on the machine was tuned too high. The neighbors overheard the interview as it proceeded, and they and Schubert's son figured out what was going on and burst into the villa, enraged. Lanzmann and his colleagues had to make a run for it, and they had to throw away the expensive equipment, too. It is a funny story. Lanzmann was a good fellow. But the interview was botched. It was a victory for the Schubert family and the indignant neighbors—a victory for the people who observed the proprieties of neighborhood solidarity and respect for a family's privacy. The Schubert family pressed legal charges against Lanzmann, too, in token of the fact that neighborliness and law stand united.

The brusqueness in *Shoah* goes up against some larger niceties. Lanzmann deceived the government of Poland into allowing him to interview the peasants who lived on the outskirts of the Treblinka camp. The peasants retained horrific memories of the railroad trains and the stench that emanated from the camp. They exuded a sort of grisly odor of their own, stewing in medieval hatred of the Jews. And, when *Shoah* was at last shown to the public, the Polish government was outraged, and a good many people shared the outrage, on the grounds that Lanzmann had put Poland in a bad light. In reality, Lanzmann in the film devotes a lot of time to a Polish hero of the war, Jan Karski, which gives a balance to his presentation. But it is true that he makes no larger effort to describe the Polish reality or to assuage the Polish national pride or acknowledge the national wounds of the Polish people. Only, why should Lanzmann have troubled himself over those other topics? *Shoah* is a study of the experience of death and the extermination of the Jews, and it is not a study of Poland.

Just now Lanzmann has come under a similar attack in regard to France—though the attack has been made from an unusual angle, which is that of Shlomo Sand, the eccentric Israeli historian. Sand is the author of *The Invention of the Jewish People* (about how the Jews delude themselves into supposing themselves to be a people, when he believes that Jews are, instead, largely a Turkic-speaking people known as Khazars) and *How I Stopped Being a Jew* (a natural follow-up to *The Invention of the Jewish People*) and other books. And this year he is the author of *The End of the French Intellectual*, which argues, among other points, that mainstream intellectuals in France have been all too sympathetic to Israel over the years, and

all too hostile to the enemies of the Jews—and Lanzmann bears the responsibility for some of those terrible developments. I [reviewed](#) the book in *The New York Times* a few weeks ago, but my review was short, and there was no space to discuss the part about Lanzmann in particular. The attack on Lanzmann is pretty brutal, though. Lanzmann is to blame, in Sand's view, for his regrettable influence on Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Sand recalls with outrage that Beauvoir herself wrote a preface to the text edition of *Shoah*. And yet, in Sand's view, *Shoah* ought to be seen as corrupt.

The French government helped subsidize the film, along with the Israeli government. And Sand observes that, over the course of his 9 1/2 hours, Lanzmann in his interviews (the whole of *Shoah* consists of interviews, one after another, with not a single moment of stock footage) says nothing about the French role in the mass extermination—nothing about the French police rounding up the Jews and deporting them to the camps. Which strikes Sand as suspicious. The nicety that Sand wants Lanzmann to observe is, in this case, the obligation to criticize one's own country, as Sand himself can be counted on to do, night and day. But why should Lanzmann have criticized France? His topic is what happened to the people who were sent to the camps, and not how they got there—a single topic, and not a collection of topics: the single enormity that one person after another would prefer, on grounds of this or that notion of proper behavior, to avoid discussing. Then again, Sand finds something dubious in Lanzmann's topic in itself, given that, from Sand's viewpoint, Lanzmann's lavish attention to the murder of the Jews has only made it harder to contemplate the sufferings of the Arabs—a nearly criminal consequence that has predictably come from making such an elaborate and ambitious film about a criminal act. And in these ways, the objections to Lanzmann and his relentless focus on the mass extermination go on piling up, now in petty ways, now in ways that appear to be graver.

Lanzmann has produced a number of outtake epilogues to *Shoah*, and the one that he presented in 2014, *The Last of the Unjust*, has got to be the ultimate in teasing out the contradiction of niceties and enormities. The epilogue, at a mere four hours, consists almost entirely of an interview from the 1970s with the Vienna Rabbi Benjamin Murelstein, whose story is perplexing in the extreme. Murelstein was required by Adolf Eichmann to cooperate with the Nazis in organizing the roundups and dispossessions of the Austrian Jews. And he did as demanded. Ultimately he ended up as the head Jew in Theresienstadt, the so-called model concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, which the Nazis established

to deceive the world about what was happening to the Jews. Theresienstadt served as a transit station to Auschwitz (which you can read about in a harrowing memoir called *My Crazy Century* by the Czech writer Ivan Klíma, who spent a few years of his young childhood in Theresienstadt and survived only because his father was the camp electrician, and the Nazis had need of his services). But Theresienstadt had the look of a decent place, and Murelstein's task was to keep up the look. He refused to make the decision about who the Nazis would take away at any given moment, but in other respects he performed as he was ordered to do, in the hope of making things better instead of worse, and in the hope of achieving his own survival. His predecessors at Theresienstadt were, all of them, killed, which meant that his own survival was a long shot. But he made it through. He was loathed by the Jews, of course. After the war, he ended up in Italy, an electrical-goods salesman. And he spoke to Lanzmann.



J. Hoberman, who reveres *Shoah*, wrote about *The Last of the Unjust* for *Tablet* magazine and did not revere it. Hoberman [considers](#) that Hannah Arendt and a great many other commentators are correct in condemning the Jews who went along with the Nazis in the camps, and he considers that Lanzmann was foolish to present Murelstein so sympathetically. But I have to say that Hoberman, who has persuaded me a hundred times over the years, does not persuade me this time. Lanzmann invites Murelstein to reflect on his situation and his actions, and Murelstein's reflections turn out to be those of a lucid and serious man, and not just a cultivated one. His own view of Arendt was angry and dismissive, and it seems to me more than a little convincing. Arendt got Heidegger wrong, which might be explained away by the intimacy of her emotions, and she got Eichmann wrong, which might be explained away by her lack of information about the case; but to be wrong twice suggests a systematic error. But Murelstein did not lack information. He observed Eichmann from a closer angle than any other Jew in the universe, and he knew that Eichmann was not, in fact, a banality, nor

was he a cog in a bureaucratic machine. Eichmann was a “demon,” and he burned with hatred for the Jews, and he took part physically in wrecking the Vienna synagogue on Kristallnacht. Marmelstein collaborated with the Nazis not because he entertained an illusion about something decent lurking within them, as Arendt did about Heidegger, and not because he entertained an illusion that merely impersonal forces were at work, which could perhaps be manipulated or evaded, but precisely because he entertained no illusions at all. Nor was he drunk on his own power, such as it was. He knew that he was up against death, he and all of the Jews. And he chose to maneuver as best he could, not with an eye to making himself look good, either. Early on, he could have escaped, too, but he and his wife elected to remain among the doomed.

The shocking moment in regard to niceties and enormities in *The Last of the Unjust* comes at a point in the conversation between Lanzmann and Marmelstein in Rome when Lanzmann puts his arm around Marmelstein’s shoulder, in a gesture of what appears to be solidarity, or perhaps of friendship. Lanzmann in that moment accepts Marmelstein. He admires him, or more than admires him. Hoberman describes Lanzmann’s gesture as a pretense of being “buddies,” but I think that, when you watch the film, it does not look like a pretense. Only, how to interpret the gesture, in that case?

Lanzmann was fond of me, in his fashion, because I wrote an admiring review of *The Patagonian Hare* in the *The New York Times Book Review*. He expressed his appreciation by sending me a note angrily complaining that I had called him a “journalist,” when he was, instead, a “writer.” I explained to him that, in American English, we do not make the French distinction between “writers,” whose status is glorious, and “journalists,” whose status is professional, and there was no insult in having been called a journalist. Besides, he *was* a journalist. Next he complained that I had praised his translator, Frank Wynne, when, in reality, the translator had done a terrible job, and the results had come out well only because Lanzmann himself had corrected the errors. I explained that it was not my business to look into the back-and-forth that may have gone into the production of the book, but merely to judge the results. And then, having vented sufficiently, he let his angers subside. We arranged to see each other in New York or Paris, and, as it happened, in both places. And when we did, the conversation naturally drifted in the direction of that one scene in *The Last of the Unjust*.

My view wasn’t Hoberman’s, but neither did I find it easy to accept Lanzmann’s interpretation. To accept the cold logic of Marmelstein’s maneuverings was not

difficult, but I thought it would be easier to accept the man himself if he had seemed less sure of his own actions, if he had seemed tortured by his own decisions. A sentimental common sense cries out, I thought, for the man to have committed suicide after the war, out of an inability to square his actions and his conscience. Then, too, a sentimental common sense would have been happier with Lanzmann—with the Lanzmann who appears on screen—if he had expressed a bit of uncertainty over what to make of Marmelstein, a tortured feeling of his own, perhaps—something complicated, instead of the simple affection that is expressed by a casual embrace. Such were my thoughts. I said them aloud.

Lanzmann was unimpressed. “Why should he have committed suicide? He had no reason.” In the film, Marmelstein explains that, during the period of the Eichmann trial in Israel, he wrote to the Israelis and offered to share what he knew. But the Israelis wanted nothing to do with Marmelstein, and they failed to reply, even if what he knew went beyond what anyone else knew. In Lanzmann’s view, the Israelis did this because they wanted to claim the credit for resisting Eichmann for themselves, and, for that reason, they were willing to forgo making use of Marmelstein’s information, and were willing to leave the world uninformed. The state interest of the Israelis: Here was a nicety! If anyone should have committed suicide, Lanzmann told me, it was the Israelis!

As for his own judgment, he saw no reason to feel tortured. He considered Marmelstein to be honest and forthright, and he admired him for it. Lanzmann told me, “I loved him”—and, because our conversation was in English, the word “loved” did not contain the ambiguity of the same word in French, which can also mean “like.” Love, though—why did he love him? I did not press the question, but I can imagine the answer.

The single most famous scene of *Shoah* is the interview with a man named Abraham Bomba at a barbershop in Tel Aviv, in which Bomba explains, as he goes about clipping hair, that he was a *sonderkommando* at Treblinka, in charge of ushering Jews into the gas chamber. Sometimes his duty was to cut the hair of naked women just before they entered the chamber, or once they were inside, in order to collect it for the use of the Germans. On occasion he knew the women, too. It is a horrifying interview. And, in *The Patagonian Hare*, Lanzmann explains that, once it was over and the camera had stopped running, he and Bomba embraced. They became friends: Bomba visited him in Paris. It is the embrace that catches my eye. I suspect that Lanzmann felt something of the same love for Bomba and for Marmelstein, and that was because these were men

who, in nearly opposite ways, had seen the event directly (face to face with the gas chambers, in Bomba's case; face to face with Eichmann, in Murlmelstein's case); and survived (because, in both cases, they had allowed themselves to become useful to the Nazis); and retained their lucidity; and proved to be capable of describing accurately what they had seen and thought. The two men were heroes for that reason, even if their feet and hands were caked with the mud of the Nazi crime. Lanzmann gave them their chance for heroism, which was to be straightforward and articulate in front of his camera, and they took it. *Their* eyes did not turn to the side. *Their* attention did not wander into side issues such as the prestige of the Polish people, or the guilt of the French police, or the plight of the Arabs, or the privacy rights of the Schubert family, or the right to a promised anonymity for the Unterscharführer of Trebelinka. *Their* eyes, the eyes of the barber and the sophisticated Viennese intellectual, remained fixed on the thing itself.

Paul Berman is Tablet's critic-at-large. He is the author of *A Tale of Two Utopias, Terror and Liberalism, Power and the Idealists*, and *The Flight of the Intellectuals*.

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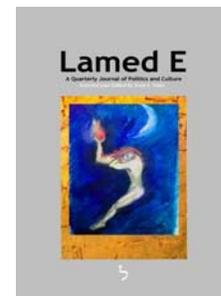
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Shana Tova u'Metuka!!!

שנה טובה ומתוקה



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