

Some Patterns of Exile in Jewish Writing of the Commonwealth

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THE recent publication of *The Spice Box: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Writing*¹ and *Shalom: A Collection of Australian Jewish Stories*² provides a convenient starting point for a comparison of some of the concerns of Jewish authors working outside the mainstream of Jewish writing in English which emanates from the United States. Given the Australian writers' preoccupation with punchline plots and the number of pieces which centre on non-Jewish or incidentally Jewish characters, Nancy Keesing's choice of stories selected to "yield insights about Australian Jewish life" amply illustrates her acknowledgement that "There is not, and never has been, an identifiable school or group of Jewish writers of fiction in Australia."³ Unlike their Canadian counterparts, Australian Jews tend to write more as Australians than as Jews; Judah Waten has commented that "Although half my work is about foreign Jewish migrants I do not regard myself as a Jewish writer, but as very much an Australian writer who happens to be of Jewish extraction."⁴ David Martin was unable to "overcome reticence"⁵ about his Jewish background until *Where a Man Belongs* (1969), which appeared after more than twenty books, even though Nancy Keesing has argued rather unconvincingly that an earlier novel, *The Young Wife* (1962), includes many "translations" of typically Jewish characters and situations.⁶ Among Australia's better known novelists, Morris Lurie, a generation younger than Martin and Waten, seems the most at ease with his Jewishness, describing in a racy, humorous style Melbourne characters who could almost have grown up on St. Urbain Street.

In contrast, *The Spice Box*, containing "the best writing [the editors] could find . . . on the subject of being Jewish in Canada,"⁷ is the product of a highly visible and accomplished literary community which draws much of its material from the problems of Jewish life. As represented in this anthology, Jewish Canadian writers share an almost self-indulgent sense of loss: the loss of childhood, the deaths of parents and grandparents, the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis, and above all, the decline of a once vital cultural, ethical and religious heritage. Despite these significant differences, the two anthologies indicate that to be a Jewish writer in either Dominion is to be an exile on many levels. The old homeland (Europe) has been destroyed; the new homeland (Israel) is, with some exceptions, insufficient; the land of present residence offers material rewards at the expense of traditional values. While gentile Commonwealth writers often confront the problem of mediating between two ideas of home, England and their native (or adopted) land, Jewish writers face the added dilemma of writing from a colony within a colony, looking backward to continental Europe, forward to Israel, and sideways at the United States, the current homeland of English-language Jewish culture.

The discomfort of this internationalism is pointed out by Morris Lurie in two stories whose protagonists are modern Wandering Jews. In "Home Is" a friend tells jet-set former poet Max Gottlieb that "Home is where your friends are";⁸ however, Gottlieb feels completely at home only when strapped into the throbbing seat of an airplane, shuttling between destinations. In "French Toothpaste," Isaac Shur is seeking solace on a Greek island when he becomes obsessively aware of the many sources of his possessions: "My typewriter is Italian, my handkerchief is Swiss, my shoes are Danish, my cigarette box is from Yugoslavia."⁹ He evades asking "Who am I?" but hears in a rooster's crow the question, "Is there a God?"¹⁰

During his nine expatriate years in England and continental Europe Lurie likewise spent some time on a Greek island, only to realize that he and his friends must look as alien and intrusive to the Greeks as did his embarrassingly noisy, uninhibited Jewish relatives to his neighbours when he was a child in Melbourne.¹¹

Eventually learning that "Expatriatism is a sad and unnatural condition,"¹² he returned to Australia. For literary inspiration, however, he continues to look elsewhere. Nearly all the essays in the "Literary Matters" section of *About Burt Britton etc.* (1977) concern the United States, the home of William Saroyan, Herbert Gold, John Cheever, Kurt Vonnegut — writers who have mattered to him — and of Isaac Bashevis Singer, who "has told me about my past. . . . I am Polish too, though born in Australia, but where Singer remembers and records, my parents chose to forget."¹³

The United States' collection of prominent Jews has made the country appear, to many non-American English-speaking Jewish writers, the literary equivalent to the Promised Land their parents and grandparents sought when they left Europe several generations ago. As Mordecai Richler notes, rather enviously,

The Jews in Canada have never taken as integral a part in the political and cultural life of their country as have the American Jews. . . . [L]ooking down on the cultural life of New York from here, it appears to be a veritable yeshiva. I won't even go into the question of Broadway or television, but from *Commentary* by way of *Partisan Review* to the *Noble Savage*, from Knopf to Grove Press, the Jewish writers seem to call each to each, editing, praising, slamming one another's books, plays, and cultural conference appearances.¹⁴

Aviva Layton echoes Richler when she has Australian-born Anna Cohen describe the United States as "the place where I should have been born, where my parents should have gone in the first place. Where all European Jews should have gone."¹⁵

The theme that Jewish emigrants ended up in the wrong place reverberates through the fiction and memoirs of Canadian and Australian writers. In the history of Richler's family, "Canada was not a choice, but an accident";¹⁶ on board ship his grandfather traded his train ticket to Chicago for one to Toronto. Boys growing up on St. Urbain Street found themselves in a pale imitation of "the United States. The real America. . . . We were governed by Ottawa, we were also British, but our true capital was certainly New York."¹⁷ According to Larry Zolf, his father regarded residence in Canada as an intermediate step in his quest

for the American Dream: "He looked on Canada as a place where Americans sent people they didn't really want to have *now*, but might take in later on, provided that while here they were always on good behaviour. In a sense, he regarded Canada as America's Australia — a temporary penal colony for temporary undesirables."¹⁸ As Fredelle Bruser Maynard illustrates in *Raisins and Almonds*, her memoir of her gullible father's successive failures during the thirties on the Prairies, the Jew who cannot make good in the United States is destined to repeat his disasters in Canada. That Canada was a stopping-place rather than a destination is borne out in Adele Wiseman's novel, *The Sacrifice* — anywhere that Abraham chooses to alight from the train is as good as anywhere else. And in Dan Jacobson's *The Beginners*, South Africa similarly serves as a temporary home for Benjamin and Sarah Glickman, between Russia, where they are born, and Israel, where they retire.

Among Australian writers, the sense of dislocation focuses less on exile from the United States than on a generalized feeling that "this is an uncomfortable place. It has always been an uncomfortable place."¹⁹ Mother, in Judah Waten's *Alien Son*, selects Australia over America, France and Palestine partly because "she was sure that Australia was so different from any other country that Father was bound to acquire a new and more solid way of earning a living there." Yet "Before she was one day off the ship she wanted to go back,"²⁰ an attitude she retains for the rest of her life. To the cultured German Jews of David Martin's *Where A Man Belongs*, Australia is "the land to which no one went of his own free will."²¹ German-born Max Stieglman had chosen to spend the war as a refugee in England, but found himself participating in a modern re-enactment of Australia's history as a penal colony when he was interned as an enemy alien and shipped down under. To the parents of Leo Axelrod, in Morris Lurie's novel *Flying Home*, "Australia was an unfortunate thing that had happened to them, that Hitler had done. . . . An accident. It wasn't the real world."²² Elsewhere, Lurie relates that the discovery of old scars on his grandmother's lungs had forced his mother's family, fleeing the Nazis, to change their

destination at the last minute from America to Australia: "Australia had no law about lungs."²³ Lurie ponders:

So what is it, this Australia? A refuge for scarred lungs? Someone asked me once to write about Australian Jewish humour. There are a lot of Jews here, anyway enough. . . . I thought about it. I listened. I watched. I couldn't. There isn't any. Because how can you laugh when at any moment the scars could break, revealing — what? It could be anything. Don't take a chance. Be quiet. Be still. Get on with your business. Just like everyone else.²⁴

Materialistic characters whose only goal is to get on with their business and prosper like everyone else pursuing the local version of the American Dream — the Shoshonah Kuperschmidts and Duddy Kravitzes of Australian and Canadian fiction — may achieve success in their own eyes, but not in their authors'. In his short story, "A Peaceful Life?", Judah Waten positively contrasts Australia, which offers a young war refugee "a peaceful, a secure life,"²⁵ to America, where the boy's uncle hopes to "wipe out the memory of his years in Auschwitz, to avenge himself for his sufferings by making a fortune."²⁶ For Waten, the loss of the old ways and assimilation into the larger culture are simply part of the inevitable process of history; what matters in the new world is the getting of wisdom, not the accumulation of wealth. In *Distant Land* he sets up a comparison between Shoshonah Kuperschmidt, who devotes her life to pushing her family up the social ladder and making good marriages for her children, and her husband Joshua, who is forced by historical accident to turn from the hope of a scholarly life in Poland to hawking spectacles in rural Australia. Shoshonah suffers acutely for her ambitions, dying early because she defers seeking medical attention in order to attend her son's high society wedding. Joshua, at first baffled by the "irrevocable passing away of the worlds he had known; the Jewish community in Poland, the Jewish life in pre-war years in Australia,"²⁷ learns to accept the new order symbolized by his younger son's marriage to a gentile. From his experiences, he arrives at a new concept of what it means to be a Jew:

Once he had thought only of Jewish causes. Now he believed that his people and the rest of mankind could not be separated into different worlds. It did not make him less a Jew. It made him

more a Jew. For him a Jew was one who respected all mankind, loved justice and believed in intellect.²⁸

Waten's optimism is shared by few other writers, who see in the assimilation and material success of Commonwealth Jews (often stressed by the anglicization of their names) the selling out of traditional values. In June Factor's story, "The Wedding," a newly arrived refugee couple are warned that Australia "is no promised land! Here we eat the bitter fruit of exile!" The survivors of the death camps reply fiercely, "If there is no peace here, then where, in God's name, can we live at rest?" and demonstrate their hope by getting up to dance, "hands joined by a cloth, as is proper."²⁹ But the wedding they are celebrating is one where their presence is barely tolerated, put on by wealthy, assimilated relatives who want nothing to do with their old-fashioned poor relations.

While nearly all Jewish writers note the dissolution of old ways, regretting, like Jack Ludwig, that they "cannot find Bibul's like in Winnipeg today,"³⁰ it is not just the passing of the old order but its diminution that incites some of Richler's sharpest satire. The modern Reformed rabbi who speaks publicly on "The Jewish Attitude to Household Pets"³¹ represents as much of a decline as do aging Jewish radicals, thirty years later using their Spanish Civil War scars to attract the attention of young starlets.³² Duddy Kravitz's Uncle Benjy voices the bitterness underlying much of Richler's fiction when he exclaims,

"There used to be some dignity in being against the synagogue. With a severe orthodox rabbi there were things to quarrel about. There was some pleasure. But this cream-puff of a synagogue, this religious drugstore, you might as well spend your life being against the *Reader's Digest*."³³

Hence, much of the comedy in Richler's brilliant story, "Mortimer Griffin, Shalinsky, and How They Settled The Jewish Question,"³⁴ which describes how a perfectly ordinary liberal WASP finds himself trapped into becoming an Orthodox Jew, arises from its reversal of the normal pattern of assimilation.

The new land almost inevitably offers the Jewish immigrant some degree of success — in the second generation if not the first

— because the Jews quickly learn to ally themselves with the existing Anglo-Saxon power structure. In the literature of Canada, Australia and South Africa they are generally shown to evade acknowledging the “kinship in oppression”³⁵ with native Indians, French Canadians, Aborigines or Blacks which appears in A. M. Klein’s description of an Indian reservation as a “grassy ghetto, and no home”³⁶ and in Dan Jacobson’s South African story, “The Zulu and the Zeide.” The latter recounts the relationship that grows between a senile old Jew and the black servant hired to care for him. Hand in hand, “The young bearded Zulu and the old bearded Jew from Lithuania walked together in the streets of the town that was strange to them both,”³⁷ fellow outcasts in the land where one was born and the other dies. The youthful narrator of Judah Waten’s *Alien Son* experiences a brief sense of alliance with an Aborigine girl who is almost raped by the same boys who call him a dirty Jew, but his sympathy is tinged with guilt, for like her attackers he finds her sexually attractive. When a Jew does try to express his sympathy with an Aborigine, in David Martin’s story, “Where a Man Belongs,” he learns that anti-semitism has preceded him to the new world. The old Aborigine, an exile in his own land, is denied the right to drink at the hotel bar in a small town; Jack Cowen, formerly Jacob Cohen, is a post-war refugee seeking Australian citizenship. Before he receives his papers, Cowen simply regards the black man as “exotic”; after the important letter arrives, Cowen magnanimously gives him a pack of cigarettes, thinking, “What good was it to that man to be an Australian? . . . Only to be left, rotting and abandoned, with a slum of his own, at the edge of the town. At least Mr. Cohen, passport or no passport, had never been refused a drink.” But in the ensuing conversation Cowen/Cohen is reminded that he, too, is an alien; when Cowen identifies himself as a Jew, the Aborigine searches his memory for some understanding of the word and finally replies, “Jew . . . I know Jew. Jew, him belong fellas kill Jesus?”³⁸

Perhaps because of their tendency to live in urban rather than rural areas, Canadian Jews in literature have almost no contact with native Indians (with the obvious exception of Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*). The oppressed group to touch them

most closely is the French Canadians, with whom their relationship has been prickly and ambiguous. Their attitudes towards the Québécois range from gratitude to the nursing sisters ("biblic birds"³⁹) of A. M. Klein's childhood memory, to not entirely groundless fears of anti-semitism: "They were the mob. Give them a chance and they'd burn down the synagogue. Pepsies. Frogs. Fransoyzen."⁴⁰ In both *The Street* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* Richler illustrates some of the complexities of this relationship. The Jews regard the French Canadians as inferiors, but also fear and depend on them: "Pea-soups were for turning the lights on and off on the sabbath and running elevators and cleaning out chimneys and furnaces. . . . The French Canadians were our *schwartzes*."⁴¹ The children fight each other on the streets, yet share some of the same disadvantages: "Even the French Canadians, who were our enemies, were not entirely unloved. Like us, they were poor and coarse with large families and spoke English badly."⁴² Thus Duddy Kravitz is prepared both to exploit Yvette and trust her, taking equally for granted her secretarial and her sexual services, but his limited sense of loyalty precludes the possibility of love.

Jews in South African literature find themselves in an even less comfortable position than the Jews in Quebec vis-à-vis a powerful English-speaking minority, a larger white group given to occasional open expressions of anti-semitism, and an oppressed native population. In his short story, "A Day in the Country," Dan Jacobson shows a Jewish family caught between their liberal sentiments and their fear of personal danger. Dreading abuse from a group of Afrikaners who enjoy a cruel joke by terrifying an African child, they hold back their indignation: "Had we not been Jews, we might have reproved them more strongly for what they did to the piccanin." However, the Afrikaners are similarly trapped: "Had they not been Afrikaners, who believed their reputation to be one of brutality and uncouthness — all of which they had confirmed, they feared — they might simply have fought us off. But we were all prevented from fighting, and prevented from peace."⁴³

This kind of uneasy truce becomes intolerable for most members of the Glickman family in Jacobson's novel, *The Beginners*.

As the Afrikaner Nationalists gradually tighten Apartheid restrictions during the 1950's, Sarah Glickman observes that "I . . . feel like I know what it was like to be a good German, who did nothing against Hitler."⁴⁴ However, in this novel few Jews are willing to commit themselves to the radical opposition to Apartheid which sends several friends of the Glickman children to jail. Joel Glickman finds himself increasingly alienated from the land of his birth, turning first to Israel, where his Zionism wanes, and eventually settling in England, where he remains troubled and insecure. His sister Rachel, who stays in Johannesburg, assuages her conscience with money-raising and feeding programmes while her husband shrewdly profits from his investments in gold-mining stock. Their old-time Zionist parents and younger brother David finally settle in Israel, their emigration motivated less by dissatisfaction with South African politics than by their own sense of identification with the new Jewish State.

Israel is treated as a less viable option by Canadian and Australian novelists, who generally prefer to have their characters come to terms with their identity as citizens of one of the Dominions. David Martin's Max Stiegelman, returning to the England of his youth and the Germany of his childhood, recognizes that he belongs in neither Europe nor Israel. "You are your own country,"⁴⁵ a friend tells him, and the country where he can be himself is Australia. In Morris Lurie's *Flying Home*, Leo Axelrod travels to Europe to try to escape both being Jewish and being Australian. But the ghosts of his parents and zaydeh compel him to visit Israel, where he finally lays his past to rest and escapes, he hopes, to life and love in the present.

The two anthologies with which this discussion began show that the mythical idea of Israel ("Next year in Jerusalem") is more attractive than the political and moral problems presented by the historical reality of the Jewish State. In *The Spice Box*, Irving Layton's poem, "Israelis," celebrates the militant strength of Jews who refuse to be victims, "God being dead and their enemies not,"⁴⁶ a position quite alien to the *shtetl* tradition of passive acceptance and religious contemplation. In the same volume, Mark Sarnier argues that this change in the focus of Canadian Judaism, from the Jews' covenant with God and their

interpretation of the law to financial and moral support for Israel, leaves young Canadian Jews facing a spiritual void: "There is the distinct feeling of being wanderers once more, but this time on a barren, internal landscape."⁴⁷ Nancy Keesing ends *Shalom* with two stories which similarly indicate that modern Israel does not resolve the alienation of the Diaspora: a chapter from Lurie's *Flying Home* in which Israel is revealed to be more of a homeland for Axelrod's father than for himself, and her own story, "Middle Eastern Questions," whose very title suggests ambivalence towards the moral dilemmas faced by liberal-minded supporters of modern Israel.

In 1931 in Winnipeg little Fredelle Bruser's father explains the itineracy of their life by telling her, "A Jew is a wanderer."⁴⁸ During the First World War, Judah Waten's Father identifies with Australia, declaring, "We belong to this new land. It has sucked us in whether we know it or not."⁴⁹ From the tension generated by experiencing simultaneously these two conflicting self-definitions arises the sense of exile which pervades Jewish writing of the Commonwealth.⁵⁰

NOTES

- 1 Gerri Sinclair and Morris Wolfe, ed., *The Spice Box: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Writing* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981).
- 2 Nancy Keesing, ed., *Shalom: A Collection of Australian Jewish Stories* (Sydney: Collins, 1978).
- 3 Keesing, p. 9. Proportionately, there are fewer Jews in Australia than in Canada. 1976 census figures state that Australia had 53,441 Jews in a total population of 14,21,900; Canada in 1971 had 276,025 in a total population of 21,568,311, of which approximately fourteen million were English-speaking. In South Africa in 1970 there were 118,200 Jews in a total population of 21,402,470, of which 3,726,540 were white.
- 4 Judah Waten, "My Two Literary Careers," *Southerly*, 31 (1971), 90.
- 5 David Martin, "David Martin on David Martin," *Southerly*, 31 (1971), 167.
- 6 Nancy Keesing, "Where Does a Man Belong?", *Overland*, No. 63 (Autumn 1976), p. 11.
- 7 Sinclair and Wolfe, p. v.
- 8 Morris Lurie, "Home Is," in his *Happy Times* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), p. 38.
- 9 Lurie, "French Toothpaste," *Happy Times*, p. 123.
- 10 Lurie, "French Toothpaste," *Happy Times*, p. 131.

- 11 Morris Lurie, "You Can Go Home Again," in his *About Burt Britton etc.* (New York: Horizon, 1977), pp. 93-94.
- 12 Lurie, "You Can Go Home Again," *About Burt Britton etc.*, p. 99.
- 13 Lurie, "Isaac Bashevis Singer, A Love Story," *About Burt Britton etc.*, p. 10.
- 14 Mordecai Richler, "Their Canada and Mine," in Sinclair and Wolfe, p. 235.
- 15 Aviva Layton, *Nobody's Daughter* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), p. 108.
- 16 Mordecai Richler, *The Street* (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 17.
- 17 Richler, *The Street*, p. 59.
- 18 Larry Zolf, "Boil Me No Melting Pots, Dream Me No Dreams," in Sinclair and Wolfe, p. 253.
- 19 Lurie, "Place," *About Burt Britton etc.*, p. 79.
- 20 Judah Waten, *Alien Son* (1952; rpt. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1972), pp. 180-81.
- 21 David Martin, *Where a Man Belongs* (London: Cassell, 1969), p. 53.
- 22 Morris Lurie, *Flying Home* (Collingwood, Aust.: Outback Press, 1978), p. 111.
- 23 Lurie, "Place," *About Burt Britton etc.*, p. 77.
- 24 Lurie, "Place," *About Burt Britton etc.*, p. 81.
- 25 Judah Waten, "A Peaceful Life?" in Keesing, p. 163.
- 26 Waten, "A Peaceful Life?" in Keesing, p. 160.
- 27 Judah Waten, *Distant Land* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1964), p. 116.
- 28 Waten, *Distant Land*, p. 187.
- 29 June Factor, "The Wedding," in Louise E. Rorabacher, ed., *Two Ways Meet. Stories of Migrants in Australia* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1963), p. 128.
- 30 Jack Ludwig, "Requiem for Bibul," in Alec Lucas, ed., *Great Canadian Short Stories* (New York: Dell, 1971), pp. 222, 223.
- 31 Mordecai Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p. 145.
- 32 Mordecai Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman* (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 225.
- 33 Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, p. 146.
- 34 In Sinclair and Wolfe, pp. 211-23.
- 35 Dan Jacobson, "A Day in the Country," in his *Inklings. Selected Stories by Dan Jacobson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 15.
- 36 A. M. Klein, "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga," in Klinck and Waters, ed., *Canadian Anthology* (Toronto: Gage, 1974), p. 342.
- 37 Dan Jacobson, "The Zulu and the Zeide," *Inklings*, p. 24.
- 38 David Martin, "Where a Man Belongs," in Rorabacher, p. 26.

- ³⁹ A. M. Klein, "For the Sisters of the Hotel Dieu," in Klinck and Watters, p. 339.
- ⁴⁰ Leonard Cohen, *The Favorite Game* (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 46.
- ⁴¹ Richler, *The Street*, p. 27.
- ⁴² Richler, *The Street*, pp. 55-56.
- ⁴³ Jacobson, "A Day in the Country," *Inklings*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁴ Dan Jacobson, *The Beginners* (1966; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 405.
- ⁴⁵ Martin, *Where A Man Belongs*, p. 168.
- ⁴⁶ Irving Layton, "Israelis," in Sinclair and Wolfe, p. 191.
- ⁴⁷ Mark Sarnier, "Beyond the Candles of Chanukah," in Sinclair and Wolfe, p. 284.
- ⁴⁸ Fredelle Bruser Maynard, *Raisins and Almonds* (Don Mills: Paperjacks, 1973), p. 80.
- ⁴⁹ Waten, *Alien Son*, p. 84.
- ⁵⁰ I would like to thank Dr. Diana Brydon, of the English Department of the University of British Columbia, for her advice and encouragement in the preparation of this essay.