Blue Skies: Reflections on Hollywood and the Holocaust

Leslie Epstein

I was born in 1938, in May, the same month Germans began sending Jews to Dachau. Germans? Jews? Dachau? I saw the light in Los Angeles, and for all I know the nurses in St. Vincent's wore the starched headgear of nuns. One of my earliest memories has to do with that sort of mix-up. I must have been four at the time, maybe five, and was sitting with my playmates around the edge of the Holmby Avenue pond, waiting for tadpoles to turn into frogs. The topic for the day seemed to be religion. At any rate, one of these contemporaries turned to me and said, "What are you?" Here was a stumper. All of the possible answers—a boy, a human, a first-grader—were common knowledge. While I stalled and stammered, one of the others took over:

"I know what I am! I'm a Catholic!"

That rang a bell. A historical tolling. Over a half century before, and close to a century ago now, my grandfather had stood in line at Ellis Island, wondering how he could translate the family name—Shabilian, one way, Chablian if you're in a fancy mood—into acceptable English. Just in front an immigrant was declaring, "Mine name, it is Epstein!" My grandfather, no dummy, piped up, "Epstein! That's my name, too!" Now, on the far side of the continent, his grandson provided the echo:

"Catholic! That's it! That's what I am!"

I must nonetheless have had my doubts, which I brought home that night. That's when I first heard the odd-sounding words, *Jewish, Jew.* "It's what you are," my mother informed me. "Tell your friends tomorrow."

The next afternoon, while the polliwogs battered their blunt heads against the stones of the pond, that is what I blithely proceeded to do. I do not think that, forty-five years later, I exaggerate the whirlwind of mockery and scorn that erupted about me. I can hear the laughter, see the pointing fingers, still. What horrified my companions, and thrilled them, too, was not so much the news that I was a Jew—surely they knew no more about the meaning of the word than I—as the fact that I had dared to switch sides at all. "Religion changer!" That was the cry. "He changed his religion!" *Vanderbilt*: what if the gentleman, the greenhorn, ahead of my grandfather had said that magic name? Or Astor? Or Belmont, even? What then?

From that day to this, the word "Jew," especially in the mouth of a gentile, has remained for me highly charged, with the ability to deliver something like an electric shock—rather the way the touch of a sacred totem might be dangerous to a Trobriand Islander, or the image of God is forbidden, awesome, to the devout of my own tribe. The irony is that I doubt whether, through the first decade of my life, I heard the word mentioned within my family at all. In this my parents, the son and daughter of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, were not atypical. The second generation, emancipated, educated, was as often as not hell-bent on sparing the third the kind of orthodox regime it had had to undergo itself. Still, I imagine that my brother's and my situation lay beyond the norm. For we were brought up less in the faith of our, than that of the founding, fathers: as Deists, children of the Enlightenment, worshipers before the idol of FDR.

This lukewarm belief sprang in part from the fact that our parents had settled in California while still in their twenties. Eastern shrubs in western climes. More decisive, I think, was the reason they'd made the move. Phil, my father, followed his identical twin brother Julie to Hollywood, where both began (and Julie continues) distinguished screenwriting careers. Now the figure of the Jew, on celluloid, had undergone any number of vicissitudes; but by the advent of the talkies, particularly with *The Jazz Singer* and *Abie's Irish Rose,* the puddle in the melting pot, the stuffing in the American dream, had pretty much taken on, at least insofar as the Jews were concerned, permanent shape. In the latter film, for instance, Abie Levy and Rosemary Murphy have to undergo three different marriage ceremonies—Episcopal, Jewish, and Catholic. As Patricia Erens points out in *The Jew in American Cinema* (1985), the title that introduces World War I reads like this:

> So in they went to that baptism of fire and thunder—Catholics, Hebrews, Protestants alike.... Newsboys and college boys—aristocrats and immigrants—all classes—all creeds—all American.

Leslie Epstein is the author of, among other works of fiction, King of the Jews *(Summit, 1979). He directs the Graduate Creative Writing Program at Boston University.*

This essay was commissioned for Testimony: Contemporary Writers Make the Holocaust Personal, *edited by David Rosenberg, to be published in the fall of 1989 by Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*

Moreover, one can easily determine, by the treatment of the descending generations in this film—from the bearded, accented, and quite money-minded grandparents on—the ingredients for this Yankle stew: acculturation, assimilation, intermarriage; followed by blondness, blandness, and final effacement. These last three traits are meant always to apply to the third generation. Thus *Abie's Irish Rose* comes to a close with the birth of something like a genetic miracle—twins: Patrick, the lad; the girl, Rebecca. The movies rarely deviated from this recipe, which Erens calls "the tradition of casting Jewish actors as parents and Gentile-looking actors as their children." Make no mistake: my brother Ricky and I were firmly rooted in that tradition.

The word "Jew" had been banished from American popular culture from the beginning to the end of World War II.

Before continuing, I want to make it clear that my father and uncle were proud enough of their own Jewishness to follow both Hank Greenberg and Sid Luckman with special attentiveness. Indeed, Julie and Phil wrote the script not only for *Casablanca* (whose first word is "refugees"), but for what I believe is the *only* wartime film that dealt with domestic anti-Semitism. That, of course, is *Mr. Skeffington,* about which the Office of War Information complained, "The portrayal on the screen of prejudice against the representative of an American minority group is extremely ill-advised."

Still, is it surprising that the real-life children of the film community should suffer the same fate as the Rebeccas and Patricks their parents had created? That my brother and I should, in a sense, be acted by, or inhabited by, gentiles? Or that, since the word "Jew" had been banished from American popular culture from the beginning to the end of World War II ("If you bring out a Jew in film, you're in trouble": Louis B. Mayer), it might for the duration disappear from the households of those engaged on that particular front? Remember, the success of *The Jazz Singer,* whose theme was the repudiation of anything resembling ethnicity, turned Warner Brothers into a major studio: the Epstein twins had been writing for Jack ("See that you get a good clean-cut American type for Jacobs") Warner pretty much from the start of their careers. How could Julie and Phil, busily creating the American dream in a film like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (don't look for their names in the credits; they gave the billing to a needy friend), not allow their own children to become part of that great national audience of upturned, white, anonymous faces? Would not we, no less than Paul Muni (né Weisenfreund) or Edward G. Robinson (Manny Goldenberg of yore) or John Garfield (another Julie—Garfinkle) become transformed? "People are gonna find out you're a Jew sooner or later," said Warner to Garfield, though it was meet that all who toiled in his domain heed the advice: "but better later."

Meanwhile, the lives of the Deists went on. The great ceremony of the year was Christmas. I never lit a Chanukah candle in my life until, mumbling the words of a phonetic prayer, I held the match for my own daughter, my own twin boys. The Chanukah miracle is pretty small potatoes compared to the star in the heavens, the wise men and their gifts, the stable filled with awestruck animals, and finally the birth of the little halo-headed fellow before whom all fall to their knees. Rest assured that when all this was acted out for me, year after year, by the students of the public schools of California (I may well have donned a beard myself and gripped what might have been a shepherd's crook or wise man's staff: either that, or I am once again adopting the guise—*that's what I am!*—of my friends), the J-word was never mentioned.

What most sticks in my mind, however, is the Christmas trees: giant firs, mighty spruces, whose stars—emblematic of the supernova over Bethlehem—grazed our eleven-foot ceilings. There were red balls, and silver cataracts of tinsel, and strings of winking lights—all strung by the Black maid and butler the previous night. Mary and Arthur were there the next morning, too: she to receive her woolen sweater, he his briar pipe. Of course my brother and I were frantic with greed, whipped up by weeks of unintelligible hymns ("myrrh," for instance, or "roundyon" from "Silent Night," or the Three Kings' "orientare"), by the mesmerizing lights and the smell of the tree itself, and by the sea of packages beneath it—and perhaps above all by the prospect of the rarest of all Epstein phenomena: the sight of our parents, in dressing gowns, with coffee cups, downstairs before the UCLA chimes struck noon.

Hold onto your hats: there was Easter, too. Not a celebration. No ham dinner. No parade. But there was no lack of symbols of rebirth and resurrection: the ones we dyed in pale pastels, the ones we hid under the cushions of the couch, and others, pure chocolate, that we gobbled down. The eggs I remember best were large enough to have been laid by dinosaurs, covered with frosted sugar, with a window at the smaller end. Through this pane we could see a sylvan scene: bunnies in the grass, squirrels in the trees, and birds suspended in a sky as perpetually blue as the one that arched over the city of the angels. Aside from Christmas and Easter, there were ordinary Sundays, when it was my habit to lie late in bed, listening to the radio. Twisting the dial

between a boy's piping voice, "I'm Buster Brown! I live in a shoe! [Arf! Arf!] That's my dog, Tyge; he lives in there, too!" and the genie's growl, "Hold on tight, little master!" I'd linger at a gospel station, at which point Mary would appear at my bedroom door. "That's right," she'd declare, with a broad smile. "You going to be blessed!" She was at least more subtle than the all-American rabbi in *Abie's Irish Rose,* whose words to a dying soldier the sharp-eyed Ms. Erens quotes as follows: "Have no fear, my son. We travel many roads, but we all come at last to the Father."

Make no mistake. Muni Weisenfreund's turning into Paul Muni is one thing. Saul of Tarsus's becoming St. Paul is quite another. Everyone knows what happened after the typical European priest gave his Easter sermon. Those were not chocolate eggs the peasants had been hunting for hundreds of years. The Jews who were rounded up the month I was born would have gone free (just as the millions who were soon to be gassed in ovens or shot at the edge of ditches would have been spared) if Constantine the Great—*religion-changer!*—had not seen a flaming cross in the sky: if Christianity had remained—as I dearly wish it had—a minor sect and not become a major heresy. Nonetheless, those performances at Brentwood and Canyon Elementary had done their work. How appealing to a child, those dumb donkeys! Those cows of papier-mâché! The mumbo jumbo of "inexcelsisdeo"! Few films have moved me as deeply as Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew,* which I sat through twice in a row, weeping at the figure of Jesus, the babe in the grade-school manger, broken now on the cross.

Inconceivable that the whole of the Second World War could go by without leaving a trace. Nor did it. But the truth is that for us, in California, in sunshine, the conflict was more a matter of the Japanese than of the Germans and Jews. I doubt very much whether I noticed when the Asians in nursery school and kindergarten disappeared. Almost certainly I paid no heed when the same fate befell the old gardener who smoothed our flower beds with his bamboo rake. Odds are I was too distracted by the exciting talk of submarines off the coast, or bombs falling by parachute over Seattle.

Thus there was never any question that the threat to us would come, as it already had at Pearl Harbor, from the Pacific. I can still remember the barrage balloons, like plump brown eggs, tied off the local beaches. My brother—aged what? three? four?—saw them from the end of Santa Monica Pier and began to whimper. A trick of perspective, the sharp sea air, the taut lines gathered on buoys or barges, made it seem that these fat blimps, a mile offshore, were street-corner balloons. "Want one! Want one!" Ricky cried, stamping his feet, throwing himself onto the planks of the dock.

Throughout the house on Holmby, half-smoked cigarettes, my mother's Chesterfields, bobbed in the waters of the toilet bowls. Sitting ducks, they were, for my stream of urine, which would sooner or later burst the zig-zagging hulls, sending thousands of tiny brown crewmen over the side, to drown next to their floundering transports. Even after the war, when we moved to a yet larger house on San Remo Drive, my fantasies remained fixed upon the Far East. And on nautical warfare. We'd purchased a surplus life raft, yellow rubber on the sides, blue on the bottom, which was initially, thrillingly, inflated by yanking a lever on a tube of gas. In this vessel, on the smooth waters of our swimming pool, I floated for hours. Through the windless afternoon. Under a pitiless sun. The downed airman. With a metal mirror, also surplus, I signaled every passing plane whose silhouette did not resemble that of a Zero.

Naturally my imaginative life was shaped by the movies. The jump from the cartoon festivals I attended each Saturday at the Bruin Theater to the war films showing everywhere else seemed a normal progression, just as the cartoons themselves were an innate part of the animism of a child's world. If a discarded pair of pants could become, in the dim light of one's bedroom, a slumbering crocodile, or a breeze in the curtain a masked intruder, then there was little to wonder at when barnyard animals, creatures of instinct much like ourselves, began to dress up, sing like Jiminy Cricket, or scheme for a piece of cheese. Also: murder each other, poleax their enemies, chop them to smithereens, or flatten them under the wheel of a steamroller, as thin as a dime. All victims, it seemed, had nine lives. No death was unresurrected. It was this, I suppose, along with the white-hat, black-hat morality of the westerns, with their thousands of expendable Indians, that eased the transition to *Winged Victory* and *Pride of the Marines.* Now the enemies were mowed down like ducks, or blown, as Tom was by Jerry and Jerry by Tom, sky-high. *Yankee Doodle Mouse.* 1943.

This early immersion in cartoons may help explain why, since I probably saw as many movies about the war in Europe as I did about the fighting in Asia, my attention remained firmly fixed upon the Pacific Theater. The Germans in movies were simply too adult, real smoothies like Conrad Veidt—witty, cunning, prone to understatement and reserve. Even the Prussian stereotypes, the smoothly shaved head, curled lip, and glinting monocle of a Preminger or Von Stroheim, possessed a kind of refined sadism worlds removed from the clear-cut cruelty of a mouse handing a cat a sizzling bomb.

There was no problem of reticence in the movies that dealt with the war in the Pacific. Here the violence was full-bore. More crucial, the enemy, like the Indians, was of a different race—no, almost a different species,

like the talking animals we already knew. Indeed, when these short, comical characters—yellow-skinned, buck-toothed, bespectacled—did speak, they had something of Porky's stammer, or Woody's cackle, or the juicy lisp of Daffy Duck. Thus the most forceful images of war remained, for me, those of death marches, jungle patrols, palm trees bent under withering fire, and kamikaze pilots with blank faces and free-flowing scarves.

These images were pleasurable only because I, a Hollywood child, came to know that nothing I saw was real. Towering over the lot at Twentieth-Century-Fox was a huge outdoor sky, painted so much like the real one, white clouds against a background of startling blue, that whenever we drove by I had to look twice to see which was which. The decisive moment came when I visited a sound lot, probably at Warners, where a pilot, one of our boys, was trapped inside his burning plane. A cross section of the fuselage rested on sawhorses; the actor's legs protruded beneath it, standing firm on the floor. Also on the floor, flat on their backs, were two civilians, one with a flame-throwing torch, the other with a plain wooden stick. "Action!" shouted the director. At once the pilot began to beat on the inside of his cockpit. The torch shot gobs of fire in front of the white linen background. The fellow with the stick banged at the fuselage, so that, bucking, shaking, it seemed about to break apart. Finally the pilot managed to pry off his canopy and thrust his head into the wind machine's gale. "Cut!"

The ambiguity of both that Magritte sky and desperate scene, indeed the tranquil unreality of the war itself—all that concluded one afternoon at Holmby Park. What I remember is my father running pell-mell down the avenue, snatching me off the playground swing, and then dashing back up the hill toward our house. "The war is over!" he shouted. Either that or "The president is dead!" I have a scar, hardly visible now, under my lip, from the time I fell off that very swing. Possibly it's that catastrophe I recall—the same sense of urgency, the same excitement, the elation at flying along in my father's arms—and not Roosevelt's death, or the bomb burst that brought the war to an end.

Not long afterward we moved to the house with the swimming pool. Already my missing schoolmates were starting to return. So did our gardener, or one like him, arriving like a comical fireman in an old truck covered with hoses and ladders and tools. He tended lawns set with fig and cork trees and eucalyptus. The property was surrounded by lemon groves, which perfumed the air and filled it, two or three times a year, with canary-colored light. We weren't the first movie people in the neighborhood: Joseph Cotten's place was catercorner, on Montana; and a block or two over, toward Amalfi, were Linda Darnell, Lou Costello, and Virginia Bruce. Down the hill our school bus made a loop into Mandeville Canyon to drop off the son of Robert Mitchum. Not the first film folk, then; but among the first Jews. For when the former owner of our house, Mary Astor, changed her name, it wasn't from Manny or Muni but from the proper Lucille. The gentile who disguised himself as Phil Green in *Gentleman's Agreement* was none other than our neighbor, Gregory Peck. The closest we came to a refugee was the sight of Thomas Mann, walking his dog along San Remo Drive. The Epsteins were the pioneers.

That meant my friends had such names as Warren and Sandy and Tim and John. We used to build forts together, ride our bikes through the polo fields, and use our Whammos to shoot blue jays and pepper the cars on Sunset Boulevard with the hard round pellets that grew on the stands of cypress above. We also camped out on each other's lawns. The smear of stars in the Milky Way is the prime text for Deists. All is order, beauty, design. The ticking of the master clock. Yet our gaze, once we closed the flap of our pup tents, was lower. In the new sport of masturbation one kept score by palpable results. A drop. A dollop. At one such tourney, the champion posed in our flashlight beams, his member bent at the angle of a fly rod fighting a trout. At precisely the midway point in twentieth-century America, the rest of us, the slowpokes, saw that something was amiss. Uncircumcised. Here was a rip, a rent, in the universal design. From this common sight I drew a skewed lesson. I may have been in the immediate majority, hygienic as any in the crowd. Yet I knew as gospel that the one who had been torn from the true course of nature was not he, the victor, our pubescent pal, but I.

Which is to say that, over time, we discovered differences. This was palmy Pacific Palisades: no crosses were burned on lawns, no swastikas scratched on lamp-posts. In our half-wilderness—polo ponies in the fields below, and, above, hills covered with yucca, prowled by bobcats—there were not even lamps. But one morning I arrived at the vacant lot where the bus was to take me to Ralph Waldo Emerson Junior High, only to find that the usual allegiances had shifted. My friends greeted me by throwing clods of dirt, sending me back to the wrong side of the boulevard. Their cry was "Kike! Go Home! Kike! Kike!"

Now this was not, in the words of the old transcendentalist, the shot heard 'round the world. Certainly the incident was a far cry from the kind of warfare the Epstein boys had engaged in, circa 1921, on the Lower East Side. There, you had to battle your way against the Irish, against the Italians, just to get to the end of the

(Continued on p. 84)

LETTERS

(Continued from p. 5)

clarify the legal consciousness that he engendered. One need not rely solely on the Hirsch biography (apparently despised by Professor Henkin) to gain such insight. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that (even if he did not go all the way) Frankfurter distanced himself from his "alien" Jewishness in fervent pursuit of an idealized assimilationist Americanism, with direct consequences for his judicial performance and philosophy.

In a 1988 book about Frankfurter and Brandeis (*Two Jewish Justices: Outcasts in the Promised Land*), Professor Robert Burt of Yale Law School reports that Frankfurter "embraced American citizenship with an almost religious fervor, so that ... he was 'no longer an exile' but 'at home.'" Burt feels that Frankfurter

> believed his successful passage from alien to fully assimilated citizen gave him special insight as a judge into fundamental American values because he embodied those values in his own experience. He drew no protective mandate or special sympathy for outsiders, however, from this experience. He instead derived a mandate zealously to protect the values and status of insiders, such as he had become.

We suggested in our essay that there is a direct relationship between that assimilationist perspective and Jewish opposition to affirmative action. It surprises us not at all, then, that the first Supreme Court opinion denouncing affirmative action and invoking the model of "ethnic fungibility" characteristic of today's "reverse discrimination" charges was written in 1950 by Felix Frankfurter (*Hughes v. Superior Court,* 339 U.S. 460). In upholding the illegality of a demand by civil rights activists for proportional hiring of Blacks, Frankfurter suggested that to allow such a request would lead to similar claims on behalf "of Hungarians in Cleveland, of Poles in Buffalo, of Germans in Milwaukee...." To allow Blacks to assert the oppressive specificity of their American experience would, Frankfurter feared, exacerbate "community tensions and conflicts" to the point where "differences in cultural traditions instead of adding flavor and variety to our common citizenry might well be hardened into hostilities...." To have quelled the aspirations of Blacks in 1950 America in the name of a melting-pot ideology seems more than a little disingenuous, or self-deluded.

This is not to engage in "name-calling," which, as Charles Berezin says, is not productive. The real problem lies with an American culture that holds constant, as objective and neutral, standards of merit that are rooted in and serve to perpetuate an entrenched class structure, and that relegate persons of color to the very bottom of the hierarchy. Levin's opposition to affirmative action is based on the assumed objectivity of those standards; that assumption led us to charge him with assimilationism. Berezin calls for political unity on broader issues such as the role of the professions. (We would add the entire structure of American education.) We agree. Affirmative action is not a transformative solution—just a partial step that will be divisive so long as people remain wedded to the false ideology of equality of opportunity. □

EDITORIAL

(Continued from p. 10)

perfectly suited for such simmering—it can drag on for years, appearing to be a solution without actually forcing anyone to deal with the fundamental issue of self-determination for the Palestinians. Here Shamir's and Bush's interests overlap. It may be only in Bush's second term that the U.S. might seriously pressure Israel toward peace talks—and then only if enough American Jews are willing to support such an effort.

Meanwhile, facing Yom Kippur this year will be harder than ever. We have to deal not only with our own personal issues, but also with our collective responsibility for Israel and for the Jewish people in this second year of the Palestinian uprising. May you and yours be inscribed for a year of peace. □

BLUE SKIES

(Continued from p. 14)

block. On the other hand, while my schoolmates had never learned Emerson's pretty rhyme ("Nor knowest thou what argument / Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent"), I knew what a kike was. Thus I went home, as commanded, from which sanctuary Arthur drove me to school in the Buick.

Once a year far-flung branches of the family gathered for the Passover Seder at my grandfather's house in Santa Monica, a time warp away from Bialystok. "Say, der!" we called it, gazing with some dismay at these strange, gawky relations, mole-covered, all thumbs. The only cousins who counted were Jimmy and Lizzie, who, since they were Julie's children, and because Julie and Phil—bald from their college days, two eggs in a carton, peas in a pod—were identical twins, were therefore my genetic half-brother and sister. Jim (later a starter at Stanford) and I made a point of throwing the football around the backyard and bowling over the pale kinfolk as if they were candlepins. During the ceremony itself, which droned on forever, Jim and I would sit at the far end of the table, arm wrestling amidst the lit candles, the bowls of hot soup, the plates of bitter herbs. The empty chair, we were told, the untouched glass of wine, were not for yet more distant cousins, missing in Europe, unheard from since the start of the war, but for Elijah, who was fed by ravens and departed the earth in a chariot of fire.

That was the extent of my religious knowledge. Not once had I set foot in a synagogue or been exposed to so much as a page of the Bible. I knew more about gospel music and Christmas hymns—

"Glo-or-i-a-a, or-or-i-a-a, or-or-i-a-a, oria!"—than I did about the songs concerning grasshoppers and boils that my relatives chanted while thrusting their fingers into the sweet red wine. Bar mitzvahed? Perish the thought! Yet the idea must have occurred to someone, because, for perhaps three weeks in a row, I found myself in a Sunday school class of glum Jews whose dogma was so reformed in nature as to hardly differ from that of Franklin and Jefferson and the other founders. About this trial I remember little. Bad food, for one thing. And a distinctly dubious rabbi. My fellow sufferers seemed unlikely to be interested either in the fortunes of the Hollywood Stars—not the film colony, but the town's Triple-A baseball franchise—or pup tent pleasures. Before I left, or, more likely, was asked to leave (the issue being my habit of roller-skating between the pews of the temple), I did pick up the fragment, the refrain, of one new song: "Zoom-golly-golly-golly"—so went the nonsense syllables—"Zoom-golly-golly!" Then I zoomed off myself, on my eight little wheels, back to the rhapsodies of secular life: "Sh'boom," and "Gee (Love That Girl)," by the Four Crows.

"I got ice cream! Every flavor! Chocolate! Coffee! Vanilla! Strawberry! Lamb chop!" That speech, from a little Cub Scout play, was the first line I can remember writing. I suppose it was in the cards that I would try my hand at the craft. Phil and Julie, unique among studio employees, did their writing at home. Once, Jack Warner cracked down on them, pointing out that their contract called for them to be at work on the lot by 9:00 A.M., just as bank presidents had to. "Then tell a bank president to finish the script," said one or the other of the twins, and drove off the premises. It wasn't long before Warner had another such fit, demanding that the boys, as they were habitually called, show up at the stipulated hour. They did, and at the end of the day they sent over the typescript. The next morning Warner called them in and began to shout about how this was the worst scene he'd read in his life. "How is this possible?" asked the first twin. Concluded the second, "It was written at nine." So it was that I'd often lie upstairs, on the carpet, outside the closed library door. From the other side I'd hear a muffled voice—maybe Julie's: "yattita-yattita-yattita," it would declaim, with rising inflection; then another voice, let's say Phil's, would respond, "yattita-yattita-yattita!" Then both would break out together, indistinguishably, in their crystal-shattering laugh. It seemed an attractive way to live one's life.

Still, I don't think I wrote a story until my first year at University High. What I remember, more than three-and-a-half decades later, is a public plaza, a milling crowd, a feeling of excitement, anticipation. There is, in the description of the square, the clothing, the mustachioed faces, something of a South American flavor. The snatches of dialogue, while not Spanish, are accented somehow. Buenos Aires, then. There is no real plot, only the waiting, the crush of numbers, the electric expectation. Finally, when the tension is as great as a fourteen-year-old can make it, that is, when all the upturned faces have turned in the direction of the tall brick building, when all eyes are focused upon the high balcony that juts out over the square, the closed doors of the palace open. A small figure, unprepossessing, clean-shaven save for his mustache, and dressed in plain uniform, moves into the open. A sudden hush falls over the crowd. The man, not young—sixty-three, in fact—steps forward. He leans over the balcony's wrought-iron rail. Then, suddenly, he stands upright and raises his right hand in the air. A great wave of sound, long suppressed, breaks from the crowd. It is half a sigh, half a shout. "*Viva!*" That is the cry. "*Viva,* Hitler!"

Where on earth, or at any rate in California, with its blue skies, from which the sun seemed to shine in winter at much the same angle it did in July, did this vision of evil incarnate come from? Had I, after all, noted something hidden, unspoken in those wartime films? Or heard a few whispered remarks around the Seder table? Or seen, in newspapers, a blurred early image of what would later become such familiar photos—bulldozers at work on piles of bodies; heaps of spectacles, sheared

hair, shoes; wraithlike figures in striped pajamas; the lampshades, the ovens, the showers, the ditches? The answer is no. Rather, an answer of yes would be superfluous here. The truth is I had always known—in the same way that one knows, from childhood on, the laws of gravitation. What goes up must come down. From childhood? I might have been born with an innate grasp of the fate of the Jews. What a person learns later—the facts of physics, the formulas about the mass of objects and the square of their distance—only confirms what is carried within like the weight of his bones. Hints, hushings, inflections, a glance: these pass from Jew to Jew, and from child to child, by a kind of psychic osmosis. So it was that history passed molecule by molecule through the membrane that held me apart from my fellows, and apart from a world long suppressed, long denied.

My brother and I entered the fifties much as did the nation at large—in a kind of dumbstruck stupor. Ricky had already taken the measure of this world: he knew an illusion, a veil of maya, when he saw one. Hence he drew inward, toward the realm of the spirit. That is to say, he drifted yet further toward the East—specifically toward the gardens and incense clouds and priests of Vedanta. Ricky's sudden, and continuing, interest in karma—the way one's actions determine one's destiny in past and future incarnations, the hope of rebirth on a higher plane, the dream of final release from the endless round of being—was surely precipitated by the death of our father in 1952.

Even then we did not enter a synagogue. What rabbi could hope to match the vision of Nirvana preached by the followers of Vivekananda? Or compete with the scenes—Alec Guinness scrambling down the Eiffel Tower, clutching his ill-gotten gains—in the movie we attended instead of the funeral? A comedy, no less. There might be an echo, in our laughter that afternoon, of the afternoons at the Bruin. No death, to a child, is irrevocable. Cartoon critters pop up, living and breathing. Why not our father, in the guise of his identical twin? Retake. Double exposure. Remember, though, that at the end of *The Lavender Hill Mob* Guinness is punished for his thievery and led off in chains. The doctrine of karma is no less strict than the Hollywood Production Code. Our crime, those hours distracted, the glee, may yet lead to a lower form of existence—as Republicans, for instance, or reptiles—in the incarnation to come.

I cannot say whether Ricky was aware of the Holocaust, or, if he was, whether the knowledge had anything to do with his withdrawal. I do think that what little this country had discovered—in newsreels, mostly—about the destruction of the Jews of Europe, and the subsequent erasure of those same mental traces, may have had no small part to play in the symptoms of paranoia, the deep, dumb shock that characterized the decade. "How could these things happen in *Germany?*" it was always asked. "So clean. So enlightened. So civilized." Now we know better. It was the very modernity of German culture, its mastery of technology and of the means of mass communication, that made it, with its glorification of violence, its infatuation with death, not our century's aberration but its paradigm. Hence the chill that fell over the land. All the values of modern life had been given an ironic twist, a mocking echo. Belief in cleanliness? Here were bars of human soap. The quest for light? Here were lampshades of human skin. What we feared in the fifties was not only communism; it was ourselves.

Speak for yourself! Very well. After my quick start in my freshman year at high school, I too withdrew. That is to say, I did not write any more stories, or playlets, or imaginative prose of any kind until my undergraduate years in New Haven were drawing to a close. Why not? While the answer is complex, I think it fair to say that I was, unwittingly, willy-nilly, coming to a decision: when I was ready to write, it would be as a Jew; or, better, when I was a Jew, I would be ready to write. There was, however, a long way to go.

Among the newsreel pictures in my own mental gallery are shots of crowds dancing about piles of burning books and young, grinning soldiers cutting the beards of learned men. These images, together with what I soon would read about the music the Nazis banned from their concert halls and the paintings they mocked in their Exhibition of Degenerate Art, convinced me that the war against the Jews was in some measure a war against the nature of the Jewish mind. Absurd, I know, to claim that by exterminating the Jews the Germans were in fact attempting to eliminate Jewish art; but it is far from senseless to claim that the oppressors had come to identify the Jews with some quality of imagination, and in creating a world without one they were attempting to confirm that it was possible to live without the other.

In a sense the Third Reich had no choice. An aesthetic of Blood and Kitsch must, by its very nature, try to undo what is embodied in Abraham and Isaac: imaginative reenactment, the metaphorical power of words, the inseparable link between act and consequence, and the symbolic prohibition of human sacrifice. Specifically, what fascism repudiates in the ancient tale is the power of faith, the recognition of limits, and the trust in the word of God. Enter the Jews. It was they who took the greatest imaginative leap of all—that of comprehending, out of nothingness, an empty whirlwind, the glare of a

burning bush, the "I am that I am." In spite of much backsliding, in spite of having been warned by a jealous God (in a commandment they have rebelled against ever since) not to make likenesses, this people has continued that "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation" that Coleridge defined as the essence of imagination. In an age when such faith was no longer tenable, when the supreme fiction, *that we matter,* became a rebuke to the countervailing belief, *that everything is possible,* then those finite minds, with their dream of the infinite, had to be eliminated.

These are the thoughts, or half-thoughts, I entertain now. The lesson I drew at the time, however, was little more than the proven adage: hard to be a Jew. And dangerous, as well. Hence I joined the ranks of the silent, the stunned. Nonetheless, the ground beneath my feet was shifting. For one thing, I had wheels. The friends with whom I cruised Hollywood Boulevard in the latest model of the Buick turned out—to my surprise; no, to my shock—to have names like Alan and Robbie and David and Dick. Similarly, the books I was reading, and the stories in the *New Yorker,* were written by fellows like Norman and Saul and Bernard and, soon enough, Philip. Not to mention J. D. I saw new kinds of movies: *Night and Fog, The Diary of Anne Frank,* and, best of all, Renoir's *La Régle de Jeu.*

Still, beneath the calm surface much was in turmoil. The symptom was this: no matter what situation I found myself in, I moved to the verge, the very edge. More to the point, having already been thrown out of the Jewish temple, I proceeded to get myself banished from the citadels of Christendom. First was the Webb School, where I'd been sent, with several dozen other products of broken or unhappy homes, two years after my father's death. "With the cross of Jeee-suus"—these were the words I mouthed in compulsory chapel—"going on beeeforrre!"

"What's this?" asked one of the preppies, as the turnips were plopped on his plate.

"The week's profit," I said sweetly.

Gone. Rusticated. Dismissed. Expelled. In the land of the goyim, however, what is done may, through contrition, repentance, and a good deal of breast-beating, be undone. The suspension lasted only three days. Perhaps my goal was not so much to draw the wrath of the Christians as to bask in their forgiveness. Better a prodigal son than no son at all. A more likely explanation is that, at loose ends, in limbo, I was pushing myself toward becoming that marginal figure, the wise-cracking Jew.

Then the ground, or the scene, literally shifted. I went to college in the cold, cloudy East. My instructions from Uncle Julie were as follows: when in New Haven buy an overcoat at Fenn-Feinstein; when in New York, eat the free rolls at Ratner's. There I was, a freshman again, at Second Avenue and Fifth. My coat, three sizes too large, was reddish-brown, with hairs sticking out of the lining. On my head, a snappy hat. Round my neck a Lux et Veritas tie. After studying the menu I raised a finger to the waiter. "I'm not electric," he said, hobbling by. A quarter of an hour later a second old man shuffled over.

"What's this *ma-ma-li-ga*?" I inquired.

Said he: "Not for you."

Not for me was right. Not yet. It was still the era of the deaf and dumb.

One afternoon, toward the end of my junior year at Yale, I was standing on High Street when the mayor came out of Fenn-Feinstein and stepped into the barber shop next door. "What's the mayor doing?" asked my current straight man, as His Honor emerged from the doorway and moved toward the entrance to Barrie Shoes.

"Wednesday. 2:00 P.M.," I replied, not quite *sotto voce.* "Collection time."

We were, remember, still in the fifties. Thus, the next thing I knew I had been thrust up against the side of a car, told to hand over my wallet and be at the dean's office the next morning at ten. By eleven, I was no longer a Son of Eli. Historians may yet come to note that this injustice, together with the response it provoked, represented the true birth pangs of the counterculture. I did not, as demanded, return to California. I spent a pleasant fortnight in nearby Hamden, strolling to the campus each evening to be interviewed by various senior societies—Manuscript, Elihu, Scroll & Key. Meanwhile, enough of a flap had developed—beginning with mimeographed notes on bulletin boards and ending with an interesting call from the *New Haven Register*—to bring about my reinstatement. Thus did the balance of power between the student and administrative bodies begin to tip. Some years later, when I returned to the Yale Drama School, the quota had been abandoned, Bobby Seale was camped on the New Haven Green, and the knock on the Elihu door was answered by—her blouse unbuttoned, a babe at her breast—a coed. *Aprés moi, le déluge.*

Oxford, or "Oggsford," as my coreligionist Meyer Wolfsheim calls it in *The Great Gatsby,* proved a tougher nut to crack. What do you do with people who, when asked to pass the salt, say "Sorry!"? My boorish crowd used to hang out in the taverns and try, with comments on the weather and the bangers and the temperature of the beer, to drive the locals out. The low point (or pinnacle, depending) of this campaign occurred in the dining hall of my college, Merton (a place so stuck-in-the-mud that its library, as old as Bologna's, turned down the gift of T. S. Eliot's manuscripts because he was not yet dead).

Let me paint the scene. On the floor are a series of long tables, upon which sit pots of marmalade made from the very oranges Richard the Lion-hearted sent back from Seville. Huddled on long benches are the undergraduates, shoveling down peas and gruel. On a platform, perpendicular to the masses, the dons are drawn up at high table. The crystal, the flatware, shine. The chef, a Frenchman, has made a *poulet en papillote.* Even down in the pit, we can hear the puff of the little paper bags as they are punctured by the professors' tines. Time for the savory. The dons tilt back their heads, dangling asparagus spears over their open mouths. But what's this? A stir on the floor? Where the Americans sit? In the Jewry?

Indeed, at the moment, friend Fried, out of New Jersey, is about to be sconced. The *O.E.D.* says, "Sconce: At Oxford, a fine of a tankard of ale or the like, imposed by undergraduates on one of their number for some breach of customary rule when dining in hall." The first infraction, in 1650, was for "absence from prayers." Fried's folly, however, was making a serious remark, since the aforesaid rule forbade any conversation about one's studies, about politics, or about anything that might be construed as an idea. That left the girls at St. Hilda's and cricket. No sooner had Fried made his point about Marxist dialectics than a gleeful cackle broke out among the Brits. Instantly a waiter appeared, sporting the usual bloodshot cheeks and bushy mustache. In his arms he held the foaming chalice that untold numbers of Merton men—including, surely, the animated Eliot—had raised to their lips. Fried, deep in his argument, paid no mind. The ruddy waiter—in his white apron he looked like a kosher butcher—tapped him on the shoulder and held up, with a grin and a wink, the tankard. Fried whirled round.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" he asked, as if unaware that custom dictated he drink down the contents and order an equal portion for all those at table. "Shove it up your ass?"

Immense silence. Everything—the dons with their buttery spears, the students balancing peas on their knives, the thunderstruck waiter—was as frozen as the twelfth-century fly caught in the marmalade amber. Then, as if a howitzer had been fired, a sudden recoil. The students shrank away on every side, their hands to their mouths. "Oh!" they cried. "Oh, God!" Meanwhile Fried had turned back to his interlocutor, out of California, and together they resumed their argument about the merits of Marx and Freud, a sort of mental arm wrestling not much different from that at the end of the Seder table.

Clearly if Fried was not rusticated for this, I had my work cut out for me. To make a long story short, I found myself on the telephone with the head of my department, Dame Helen Gardner. I fear that in so many words I told her that she ought to deposit her Anglo-Saxon riddles and Middle English charms (how to get honey from honeybees, for example, or cows out of bogs) where my compatriot had suggested placing the tankard of ale. Then, having resigned the major, I packed my bags, determined to leave the university at the start of the next term.

The two best things about an Oxford education are the length of the vacations and the relative proximity of the Mediterranean Sea. I'd already been to Greece, Spain, Italy, and Southern France. Now, on a broken-down freighter, the *Athenai,* I chugged right across the greasy, gray waters. Easy enough in the lurching bowels of this vessel to imagine that you were your own grandparents, storm-tossed, debating whether it was permitted to survive on a scrap of pork. Never mind that this journey lasted only two days and that the welcoming landmark was not the Statue of Liberty but the golden dome of the Baha'i temple, high above the harbor of Haifa.

What happened to me in Israel was at once common enough and most bizarre. Instantaneously, virtually on the docks, the wall between myself and the world, that membrane, dissolved. Before my eyes hustled Jewish porters, policemen, soldiers, sharpies, and sellers of pretzels. Osmosis cannot take place, nor can one live on the margin, or be expelled, when there are Jews in solution inside and out. The idea I had grown up with—that the very word "Jew" was awesome, sacred, terrible, not to be thought of, never to be mentioned—became ludicrous on these shores swarming with the usual run of big shots and bums. What made Israel so appealing to many Jews like me (and so repugnant to the zealots of Crown Heights and Mea She'arim) was the promise of the ordinary, the prospect of the mundane. Only in the holy land could the Jews escape being a holy people.

The impact of that part of my trip (the fact that I now kept track of Sandy Koufax on his way to mowing down 269 of the goyim) was altogether banal. But there were stranger, eerier forces at work, and they involved the history of the Germans and Jews. Of course I visited the memorial at Yad Vashem and the smaller museum, with its cases of torn scrolls and striped pajamas, on Mount Zion. At the center of everything, dominating each day, was the spectacle of a well-guarded German, Eichmann, pleading for his life before a court of his former victims. What was odd about these things was that I saw them in the company of someone who belonged to the last generation of Germans to feel, if not guilt, then more than a twinge of shame. This was Katrin, an architect from Munich, whom I had met aboard the *Athenai.* The relationship was to last another four years.

Meanwhile, upon my return, fate had more tricks in store. My plans to leave Oxford were suddenly abandoned when Khrushchev put up the Berlin Wall. Waiting for me in England was a letter from my draft board stating that I would be inducted the moment I set foot on native soil. "Agriculture": that was the first degree-granting program listed in the University bulletin, which I'd dashed the mile to the Bodleian Library to read in only a little over the landmark 3:59.4 that Roger Bannister, my fellow Oxonian, had set a few years before. *Better boot camp,* I decided. *Better Berlin.* The Bulletin's second entry was "Anthropology." The wise guy set out to talk his way back into yet another institution of learning. "*Dip. Anthro. Oxon*" reads my laconic degree.

But it was the beast in man I studied while pretending to solve the kinship system among the Nuer. And it wasn't the wall in Berlin that occupied me, but the one the Berliners had erected in the streets of Warsaw. In brief, I spent my second year in Oxford reading everything I could about the Holocaust. And when I wasn't reading, I was writing. The subject at last was myself. This story, my first as an adult, was called "The Bad Jew," and in it the title character—a cool Californian, from Los Angeles, in fact, aloof from the faith of his fathers, unmoved by the traces of the Holocaust he sees about him—is nursed through an illness by two aged survivors. While recovering, he comes across a long letter from one child in a death camp to another. The key passage deals with the time the letter-writer, Jacob, gives way to despair and attempts to smother himself beneath a pile of dirt in Bergen-Belsen. He is foiled, first by the sensation of an earthworm moving up his leg, and then by the fear that the slightest movement on his part will crush that little creature. The right thing to do, he realizes, both for himself and for the Jews, is simply to wait. At this point a shift occurs in the tone of the story. The burden of irony, of detachment, is shifted from my alter ego to the survivor, the mother of the dead Jacob. The crisis takes place when, on a bus trip across the desert, she turns in disgust from a group of dark-skinned Sephardim and says to the hero, "*Schvartzes!* Look at them! *Schvartzes!*" The Angeleno, while no angel, is no longer the bad Jew.

I am going to close where I began, in the sunshine, by the Pacific. I owe this much to the city and those climes: if I had grown up there as a Jewish child, that is, if there had been nothing to search for, no vacuum to fill, I would never have become a Jewish adult. I returned immediately after completing my degree at Oxford to spend a year at UCLA. Ricky and I lived in an empty flat on Fountain Avenue. He burned his incense in one room; I wrote in another. The year sped quickly by. I was jogging with a friend, my old pal Alan, when the Cuban Missile Crisis was at its worst: no way to fast-talk my way out of that one. Koufax, I noted, was on his way to winning twenty-five and striking out 306. Marilyn Monroe died, and so did Pope John.

Adolph Eichmann, of course, had already been hanged. In the course of that year the work that affected me most was Hannah Arendt's account of his trial. What so angered her critics—her claim that the Jewish leadership in Europe had been so compromised, so woeful, that the Jews themselves would have been better off if they had had no self-government at all and had merely run—seemed to me then, as it does now, so obvious as to be almost a truism. How on earth could things have been worse? The second half of her thesis, concerning the banality of the *Obersturmbannfuehrer,* and of evil in general, was not welcome news either. Clearly her readers, Jews and gentiles, were more comfortable thinking of Eichmann and Himmler and Goebbels and the rest as either subhuman or superhuman—monsters, beasts, or psychopaths—and not as human beings much like themselves. What struck me most about her argument—that evil is a kind of thoughtlessness, a shallowness, an inability to realize what one is doing, a remoteness from reality, and, above all, a denial of one's connectedness to others—was how much wickedness resembles a defect, and perhaps a disease, of imagination.

That malady, whose symptom, a stunned silence, was as prevalent in the early sixties as in the fifties, could be healed only by the writers and poets whose special responsibility was to show the world what those plain men had done. As Arendt maintained, only those who have the imagination to recognize what they share with the force of evil—in her words, "the shame of being human ... the inescapable guilt of the human race"—can fight against it. And only that fight, that fearlessness, it seemed to me, could give meaning to the suffering of the Jewish people and, in that narrow sense, bring the millions of dead back to life.

Grandiose thoughts, granted. I cannot claim to have worked them through at the time. But it was partly under Arendt's spell that I spent the academic year writing a play. It doesn't take a prophet to guess the subject. An Ivy Leaguer, living abroad, first initial L., falls in love with a German heroine, first initial K. In spite of some humor ("An American Jew is someone who thinks a *shiksa* is an electric razor"), it was a tortured piece of work, haunted ("I have the feeling, when I think of Europe, of what happened here, that I ought to be dead") by the destruction of the Jews. Somehow, it won a large prize, the Samuel Goldwyn Award, and persuaded Yale to let me in yet again—this time to the School of Drama.

Here, if you so desire, is our Hollywood ending. The

award ceremony drew many loose ends together, completing a kind of cycle. Goldwyn (né Goldfish) was the producer of one of my father's last films. Uncle Julie was in the audience. So was his ten-year-old son, Philip, named for his identical twin. Jimmy and Liz, grown up, were in the auditorium, too. Alfred Hitchcock, for the Christians, gave a speech and handed over the prize. Thus did the film industry, which had played such a large role in making my childhood *Judenrein,* now bestow upon me—and for a play so Jewish it would make *Abie's Irish Rose* look like a crowd-pleaser at Oberammergau—its imprimatur.

Still, there were no happy endings. Katrin was in Munich, recovering from a recurrence of tuberculosis she had contracted during the war. I was already preparing for my trip East. Little did I know I would not return—at least not for more than a few days at a time—to the West Coast again. "Include me out": that is not just a wacky Goldwynism. It is a description, canny to the point of genius, of the lives that Jews lived on the screen, and beneath the white clouds and peacock blue of the painted sky. □

MORNINGS AND MOURNING

(Continued from p. 22)

West Side, the Upper East Side, Brooklyn. I am proud.

Seven of us are the Seder Sisters, with whom I have celebrated a third Seder, the Feminist Seder, for the past twelve years. We are about to have our Bat Mitzvahs. There is *Ms.* editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin, dressed like a religious woman, filmmaker Lilly Rivlin, psychologist Phyllis Chesler, and artists Bea Kreloff and Edith Isaac-Rose. Michelle Landsberg, a respected Canadian journalist, is new to the group.

We are rich in therapists, lest our presence cause more than distraction. There is Lily Engler, a psychiatrist, and Arlene Richards, a psychotherapist. And my youngest daughter Nehama sits next to me, standing when I say *kaddish*. Bella Abzug phoned in her regrets. She had to go out of town. "Remember," she said, "that I said *kaddish* for *my* father." All those long years ago, the lone woman in the shul.

In the place where I have always been alone, they spill over onto the rows reserved for men, and the *mekhitza* doesn't cover them. The men have to sit within close range of women, and we have to *daven* together.

"Soon there'll be more of them than of us," one sourpuss complains, crowded on his bench.

We have a nice *kiddush* with lox afterward. The sourpuss eats plenty, and I hear another *davener* say nostalgically, "Remember the old days when there was herring, lox, bagels? And the women were serving us. Remember how nice it was?"

The *shamash* leaves smiling and carrying a little bag of leftovers, including a jar of herring, one of the four reasons to live.

April 22

A crazy scene. One of the cabal blithely pulls the curtain closed. I say, "Only the rabbi touches the curtain."

Schlomo and others join in: "According to Jewish law, you don't even have a soul. We are responsible members of the congregation. You aren't even a person in the eyes of the shul. You aren't a member. You can't vote." (In the sixty-some years of the synagogue's existence women have never been allowed to become members.)

They're interrupting the *davening*. The reader is Ralph, a caring fellow in his thirties who has finished saying *kaddish* for a parent and is staying for the pleasure of the company. Today is no pleasure for him. His back is stiff, his *davening* distracted.

At the end of the service Ralph says to me, "Tomorrow you bring the scissors and I'll cut down the *mekhitza*."

I bring sharp scissors the following morning, but Ralph's not there. I think to myself, Why do I wait for him to cut the strings? Why not do it myself? I leave after the service and determine to return the next morning and do the deed.

When I arrive the next morning, the *mekhitza* is lying crumpled on the floor, the strings hanging from the ceiling. The rod is broken, the curtain slashed; the debris is piled in the corner with Ralph's card upon it.

Our *shamash* is ill, so ninety-seven-year-old Rodney, the substitute, is there. He does not feel kindly toward me.

"Is this your work?" asks Rodney.

"No," I say, stunned.

"I did it," says Ralph. "I cut the strings, I broke the rod, I slashed the curtains, I put them over there in the corner, and I left my calling card on top."

Larry, the button man, comes in and raises an eyebrow.

"I did it," says Ralph. "I cut the strings, I broke the rod, I slashed the curtains, I put them over there in the corner."

Fred, too, comes in. He is in the middle of a joke but stops laughing when he sees the curtain is down. He looks at me.

"I did it," says Ralph. "I cut the strings, I broke the rod, I slashed the curtains, I put them over there in the corner."

Then the rabbi comes in, stops, covers his face.

I walk out of the shul with Ralph. "I couldn't come in yesterday," says Ralph. "I was so upset by the attack. I realized he was attacking you only because you were a woman." I wanted to say, *"Boker tov, Eliahu"* ("Good morning, Elijah").