

#### *4. Looking Through Their Eyes*

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Now that so many countries have to face the massive arrival of immigrants and asylum seekers, a survey of migrant literature can be of help in understanding this phenomenon and confront its inherent difficulties.

A good many years back Louise Rorabacher, editor of *Two Ways Meet: Stories of Migrants in Australia*, wrote this perceptive comment:

Statistics [...] have their charm; but they can't compete with fiction as an avenue of understanding. Figures satisfy the mind; fiction appeals to the heart. [...] For here we find not the large facts but what they meant to small individuals; not the relative numbers of people but the kinds of life that those people created and endured. We find here all the elements of human experience inevitable in the migratory process, the homesickness, the painful adjustments, the bitter disappointments, the ultimate successes and failures (Rorabacher: 1976, 13-14).

It has been said that “[a]ll Australian writing can be considered migrant” (Hammer: 1988, 14). Although this is a rather sweeping statement, there is a good dose of truth in it. Ever since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, transporting the first convict settlers, Australia has received wave after wave of immigrants and is still receiving them. Many nationalities are now represented in that country and have reflected in their writings their difficulties regarding adaptation to a new environment, their failures or their successes. In 2001 a book was published bringing together stories from an SBS Independent TV series. Under the catchy title of *Tales from a Suitcase*, these stories give an account of the experiences of immigrants of diverse origins who are now considered --and proudly consider themselves-- as ‘new Australians’. The blurb on the back page of this book offers a comment, by Phillip Adams, on the making of Australia:

We are a nation of flotsam and jetsam. A patchwork quilt of population. A new nation born of the detritus of old nations. We are a hundred diasporas. And the result of this magnificent mess is a nation of extraordinary strength and resilience.

Adam's definition brings to mind Annette R. Corkhill's words: "As Said informs us, the culture of the West in the modern era is [...] in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees" (Corkhill: 1994, 13).

It is also Corkhill that has accurately remarked that "Australian literature since the nineteenth century has concerned itself with [...] the sense of displacement, the loss of personal and cultural history" (Corkhill: 1994, 175). Corkhill is referring to migrant literature in general, as the title of her book suggests: *Australian Writing: Ethnic Writers 1945-1991*. Indeed the problems and losses are common to any group of immigrants. Migration and settlement imply pain. Fiction writers just transmit this to their readers much more effectively than any official report.

To illustrate the importance of migrant literature which helps us to understand immigrants and their predicaments, as well as their value to the country that receives them, I have chosen, among other eligible immigrant groups, the work of Australian Jewish writers for various reasons. One is that the Jews have a long history of migration, of living in the Diaspora. Who has not heard about 'the wandering Jew'? Now that so many people are on the move and so many countries are affected by mass migrations, it is worth hearing what the experienced Jews have to say about the subject.

The first Jews to step on Australian soil arrived as convicts with the First Fleet in 1788. It is estimated that, out of a total of 750 convicts, 8 to 14 of them were Jews. Two centuries later, in 1991, William D. Rubinstein concluded that at the time about 100.000 to 105.000 people of Jewish extraction were living in Australia. To these he added 250.000 others who had some Jewish ancestry (W.D. Rubinstein: 1991, 92). The figures show how the group had grown, but of course there had been further arrivals after those few convicts of the First Fleet, and certainly not as unwilling immigrants. The convicts, by the way, did not produce any literature. They were otherwise engaged in the task of surviving and, as history tells us, despite the hard conditions of a hostile environment, they gave, as individuals, ample proof of their ability and resourcefulness (Rutland: 1997, 24).

What made the growth of the initial handful of Jews possible? Suzanne Rutland has noted that "[b]y 1914 Australian Jewry was a respected and entrenched, *if tiny* (my emphasis), minority [...]. In Australia there was virtual absence of discrimination against the Jewish community" (Rutland: 1997, 133). The adjective 'virtual' implies, however, that there was, after all, some discrimination. Moreover, Rutland is speaking about a very specific period. Later Jewish refugees would sometimes be called by the derogative word 'reffos' and would experience a measure of discrimination and even instances of anti-Semitism. It could be said, nevertheless, that the acceptance of Jews in Australian society has been, on the whole, satisfactory and has produced many benefits to both sides. This acceptance has given Jewish immigrants a wonderful opportunity, not only to survive, but to thrive.

In 1991 W.D. Rubinstein would comment on the Jewish success in Australia in the following words:

In considering Jewish achievement in post-war Australia, there appears to be one mathematical fraction which recurs again and again: Jews appear to comprise about 5 per cent of contemporary Australia's 'elite' groups and high achievers...

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This figure of 5 per cent represents a degree of overrepresentation of about ten times (1000 per cent) given that the Jewish percentage in the overall population is about 0.5 per cent. Such a degree of overrepresentation is phenomenal and says much both about the creativity and drive to succeed of the Jewish people, and the openness and realistic opportunities for social mobility in democratic Australia (W.D. Rubinstein: 1991, 296-97).

As we ponder on the beginnings of this community in the remote Australia, on the later arrival of successive waves of immigrants escaping pogroms and Nazism, or as survivors of the Holocaust, one cannot but admire, following Rubinstein, their tremendous success. To survive was an achievement in itself but they have as well, on the whole, preserved their religious, ethnic and cultural heritage, resisting pressures of assimilation in the Australian free and open society. Their success has been the success of Australia in general. In 1987 the then Prime Minister, Robert Hawke, addressing a Jewish gathering, remarked that “the whole of Australia has benefited from the work of Australian Jews, which has been incalculable and invaluable“ (See Rutland: 1997, 257).

A further reason for choosing the fictional work of Australian Jews for this study is because the work, though fictional, is usually based on real events. Thus, while it is on the borderline of biography and history and as such is of great informative value, it is still fiction too, and, as Rorabacher reminds us, fiction is important as “an avenue of understanding” (Rorabacher: 1976, 13). Finally, although I am aware of the value of the fiction produced by other groups --like the Greeks or the Italians, for instance-- an extra reason for my choice is the claim of the Australian Jewish writer Judah Waten who, back in 1949, maintained that the Jews were the first immigrant group to write as a migrant collective:

It is a fact that, of all the groups of people from non-British countries residing in Australia, only the Jewish people have even the beginnings of a literature about themselves that has become part of the general literature of the country (Waten: 1949, 96).

Waten gives us a very good idea of the contents of Jewish immigrant writing in Australia in his own period and prior to it. In his successful *Alien Son* (1952), set in the years 1914-1920, he offers the reader a foretaste of the problems that would be faced by migrants in Australia after the Second World War. In 1971 he would discuss these problems in his essay “My Two Literary Careers”. The composition of the population had changed considerably in Australia after the Second World War. In the period when *Alien Son* was set the immigrant population was less than one per cent. By 1971, when Waten was writing his essay, it had increased to ten per cent. Yet the individual problems faced by foreign immigrants were the same:

Loneliness, homesickness, language and cultural barriers, misunderstandings between the newcomers and the locals, divided families or the sharp conflicts between parents and children brought up in Australia, representing different worlds and social and cultural mores, are among the most common of these problems (Waten: 1971, 87-88).

Granted that emigration was inevitable to escape persecution, war, extreme poverty... why the remote Australia of all places? It was literally at the other end of the world. A number of

characters in the fiction of Jewish writers lament this. A husband in Waten's *Alien Son* complains to his wife: "Why have you picked Australia and not Tibet, for example? [...] There isn't much difference between the two lands. Both are on the other side of the moon" (Waten: 1978, 180). The mere mention of the country suggested vast distances and not only physical but also emotional. A female character in Herz Bergner's *Light and Shadow* (1963) wonders how she fits into Australia and what force dragged her all that distance (Bergner: 1963, 71).

Some of the difficulties encountered by new waves of Jewish immigrants in Australia came from older immigrants of the same community. Peter Medding has written about the obsession with acceptance experienced by the Jewish upper classes that controlled Australian Jewry in the 1920s and 1930s. They feared that those Jews newly arrived would be found too different from the average Australian and might endanger their comfortable position (Medding: 1968, 166) and Rubinstein says that, "prior to the Second World War, they often sought 'group invisibility' " (Rubinstein: 1991, 5). How could their wish to accommodate to the established culture be fulfilled, not losing their own singular personality in the process? The concern of the Jewish leaders, as Rutland points out, was for the future of the group. Acculturation was necessary; any immigrant group has to accommodate to the culture of the host country, as well as it can, and has to learn the language, but that should not imply the loss of their distinctive culture or the disintegration of the group (Rutland: 1997, 141-49).

The struggle to find the right balance has filled the pages of many novels and short stories by Australian Jewish writers, as would the pages of other migrant groups. In the case of Australian Jewish writers in the first half of the twentieth century, this struggle was for quite some time related to and made more acute by the question of intermarriage. If they wanted to survive as a group they needed to avoid marrying out. Two tales by Polish-born Pinchas Goldhar, for instance, set in the 1930s --"The Circumcision" (1995)<sup>1</sup> and "The Pioneer" (1937) -- warn their Jewish readers about the drawbacks of intermarriage. In the first one a mixed marriage will predictably end up badly as the Gentile wife cannot understand and bear the physical pain inflicted to her baby in the ceremony of circumcision. "The Pioneer" alerted readers to the dangers incurred by young Jewish men who lived isolated from their community and in the midst of a Gentile society, as they would end up marrying out.

Another story by Goldhar, "Café in Carlton" (1946), set in the aftermath of the Second World War, is an example of how traumas often journeyed with immigrants and remained with them. The protagonist of the story, a victim of Nazi persecution, after a fresh start in his newly opened café in a Melbourne suburb, finally succumbs to his haunting memories and ends up mentally disturbed. For very understandable reasons Goldhar was very pessimistic and transferred his pessimism to other Jewish authors. Hyam Brezniak explained Goldhar's pessimism in these terms: he "found himself an alien son in a new country, rootless and insecure" (Brezniak: 1967, 13).

Although he wrote in Yiddish, the mother tongue of Eastern European Jews, and had to be translated into English, Goldhar's contribution to Australian Jewish literature was relevant: "He wrote short stories about Polish Jewish immigrants [...] [I]t was a revelation to see the tensions, trials and mental agony of lonely emigrants uprooted from their former homes trying to adjust themselves to life in a new world" (Brezniak: 1967, 13).

Pam Maclean has written of Goldhar:

[H]e might be referred to as a multicultural writer before multiculturalism: as a writer whose work explicitly explored the issues of cultural disjunction in Australia before there was any general acceptance for or means of conceptualising such an approach (Maclean: 1987, 129).

Herz Bergner is another Yiddish author who “made a considerable contribution to migrant literature” (Stone: 1970, 41). According to contemporary fiction writer and essayist Serge Liberman, what Bergner describes in his work is:

a spiritually impoverished and crippled community; he tells of the loss of old values without their replacement by any others worthy and enduring: he demonstrates the playing-out of hopes and aspirations, and the nagging aching pulsations of irrepressible nostalgia... (Liberman: 1984, 179).

Liberman concludes that the works of both Goldhar and Bergner are, in fact: “immensely valuable as documents of an age” (Liberman: 1984, 180).

Bergner’s novel *Between Sky and Sea* (1946) is a strange, poetic novel describing the pathetic fate of a bunch of immigrants who have escaped the Holocaust only to meet a tragic death at sea before they reach Australia. His second novel, *Light and Shadow* (1963), narrates the struggles of a family from the moment of their arrival in Australia --ironically called a golden land, promptly to be exposed as anything but golden-- to their ultimate success in terms of money and failure in terms of family, since it virtually disintegrates.

After Bergner, Judah Waten dealt with a similar topic in his novel *Distant Land* (1964). It had been preceded by a superb book, *Alien Son*, mentioned before, that already exhibited a character whose portrait can be found in other fiction writers --like Serge Liberman--: the character of the ‘mother’ who relentlessly claims that Australia is going to finally destroy the family’s distinctive culture and refuses to accept this. The title alludes to the alienation between a son who is growing up feeling he is part of this new land and a mother who will not conform at all.

Waten’s story “Three Generations” (1978) expands on the theme of gradual assimilation and loss of Jewishness through intermarriage. The fear of intermarriage, incidentally, was not exclusive of the Jewish community. In his novel *So Far, No Further* (1971) Waten shows this fear equally affecting a Jewish and an Italian family, both afraid of the amorous relationship between their respective daughter and son. Transplanted to an unfamiliar environment, immigrant families found it hard to face the marrying out of their children.

The examples discussed so far have been taken from the work of some of the early Jewish writers in Australia. Liberman has analyzed the alternatives faced by the second generation: One would be to cling absolutely to the traditional culture, the second would be to abandon that culture completely, thus assimilating into the mainstream and the third “in some way reconciling their particular ethnic life styles and the wide Australian ones outside, at the cost of diluting or compromising their own”. (Liberman: 1999, 2). We must bear in mind that Australia has changed considerably since the days when the authors above mentioned --Pinchas Goldhar or Herz Bergner, even Judah Waten-- wrote their stories. Immigrants in those days were expected

to assimilate quickly and quietly into the dominant society. Some time later this was no longer the case. The official policy changed and encouraged immigrant literature, thus helping to preserve multiple heritages. Today, Australian Jewish fiction depicts a Jewish society in Australia that shows no signs of dilution. Pinchas Goldhar's anguished cry: "We are dying out" (See Brezniak: 1967, 14 & W.D. Rubinstein: 1991, 1-2) has been proved wrong.

In her book *Edge of the Diaspora* (1988) Rutland explains --in the chapter "The Coming of the Refugees"-- how Hitler's policy indirectly changed the restrictive policy carried out by Australia with regard to Jewish immigration. Greater quotas were assigned to Jewish immigrants and, as their numbers increased, the fears of dilution that had tormented previous immigrants were assuaged. As more Jewish immigrants were accepted in Australia, the risk of intermarriage decreased. It must be acknowledged that Australia's reasons were not exclusively humanitarian; the question was of national interest. The country needed more people. However, even though more generous quotas of Jewish refugees were allowed, they proved insufficient. Many more lives could have been saved from the furnaces had those in power foreseen the extent of Hitler's reign of terror.

Rutland says that those refugees who arrived in that period were made welcome, if not too warmly, and that some fringe groups in Australia even showed their anti-Semitism openly. And certainly the new arrivals still had to adapt quickly. Despite these conditions, Rutland remarks, those refugees were soon contributing to the welfare of Australia (Rutland: 1997, 174).

When Australia entered the war, after 1939, those German Jews who arrived as refugees were automatically considered enemy aliens. There was a shameful case when over 2000 Jewish refugees, who arrived on the ship *Dunera*, were confined in internment camps where they gave a lesson to the country by the admirable way they organized themselves, establishing an exemplary social and cultural community until justice was done and they were liberated. The episode, narrated by Benzion Patkin in *The Dunera Internees* (1979), was taken to the screen, in 1985, by Bob Weis (producer) and Ben Lewin (script and director), under the title *The Dunera Boys*.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, after the extermination of millions of Jews, and up to 1960, the immigration of Jews to Australia grew considerably. Was this due only to humanitarian reasons on the part of Australia? Again, that was not quite the case. Australia experienced considerable panic during the war, as a country that was scarcely populated and had thousands of miles of inviting beaches for the enemy to disembark on. The policy of 'Populate or Perish' was born out of that panic and immigration grew. Once more the new wave of Jewish immigrants was met with some hostility born of imported prejudices, fear of competition and the country's isolationist attitude. But, on the other hand, there were voices raised in support of the new arrivals, many of them from the artistic and intellectual milieu. Rutland writes:

After Israel, Australia accepted the second highest number of survivors of the Holocaust on a pro rata population basis [...] Many more could have benefited from the chance of a new life in a new country had the official attitude been more open. [...] Those Jewish refugees who did arrive made a substantial contribution to the development of postwar Australia, disproportionate to their small numbers, while also radically transforming every aspect of Jewish life in Australia (Rutland: 1997, 256).

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For the survivors of the Holocaust it was easier to adapt to the new land than it had been for earlier arrivals. After the Holocaust they were happy to leave a Europe in ruins and start anew somewhere else, even if it was in the remotest of all lands. And yet they felt nostalgia for the world they had known and no longer existed. These feelings, added to the usual difficulties common to any immigrant, are reflected with great understanding and compassion in some of the stories by Serge Liberman.

The refugees of this period seldom had much money but they had skills. They were usually middle class, well educated and desirous of a good education for their children. They were also hard working and enterprising. No wonder the group was successful on the whole. As Sam Lipski, editor of *The Australian Jewish News*, wrote:

[...] the success some Jews have had in creating wealth, considering how many came as poor refugees or as survivors after World War II, is a matter for pride not unease -- pride in their achievement, as well as in Australia's comparative freedom as a country which accepted them (See Rutland: 1997, 260).

Rutland reports what the then general manager of the Australian opera, Patrick Veitch, wrote in 1984:

There is little doubt that Australia would be a 'hot Siberia' were it not for the Jewish community, which brought with it not only taste and experience in the arts, but also the belief that it is incumbent upon the individual to build the arts life of the country (See Rutland: 1997, 274).

We may wonder whether Australia dropped the idea of having a monoculture easily or if it was a long process. Back in 1952, confident in the strength of the Australian British heritage, the Minister of Immigration, Harold Holt, had said:

Australia, in accepting a balanced intake of other European people as well as British, can still build a truly British nation on this side of the world. I feel that if the central tradition of a nation is strong this tradition will impose itself on [the various] groups of immigrants (See Rutland: 1997, 369).

Seventeen years later, however, in 1969, B.M. Snedden, the then Minister of Immigration, still wanted a "monoculture with everyone living in the same way, understanding each other, and sharing the same aspirations". "We don't want pluralism", he added (See Rutland: 1997, 369-70). Some ideas tend to be persistent and Snedden's attitude was radicalized in a rather recent past by Pauline Hanson who was the leader of the political party *One Nation* of notorious xenophobia<sup>ii</sup>.

Writing in 1991 Rubinstein presents a flourishing Jewish community in Australia, by no means assimilated and in no danger of disappearing (Rubinstein: 1991, 575). And Liberman adds:

The massive post-war migration, coupled with the readier acceptance of migrant participation in Australian culture has, to my mind, enriched Australian life. It has broadened its range and deepened it in content, insight, artistic form and probing (Liberman: 1999, 6).

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No matter how well Jewish immigrants adapted to Australia and Australia to them, the newcomers' initial steps were charged with apprehensions and fears. A poem by Polish born Maria Lewitt on the scrutiny attached to landing permits is very revealing:

*Smugglers*

We were met  
By brisk efficiency,  
    Passport. Landing Permit.  
    Vaccination. Chest X-Ray.  
    Name. Nationality.  
    And yes, --  
    Anything to declare?

    Hands shuffled,  
    Fingers lifted,  
    Eyes looked  
    Scanned

Nothing was confiscated.  
We were free to go.  
    Our bodies bent  
    Under the heavy cargo  
    Of our past.  
    We smuggled in  
    Values and slanted opinions.

    We failed to declare  
    Ever-lasting nostalgia.  
    Memories of distant people,  
    Already fading cities  
    And lost sunsets.

Nobody asked, nobody cared.  
We were left alone  
    And wherever we go,  
    We leave a trail  
    Of unsuspected contraband,  
    Sometimes polluting, sometimes enriching  
    Our adopted Home (Lewitt: 1988, 79).

As a matter of fact, initial difficulties notwithstanding, Australia has become gradually a real home for the people it has embraced within its borders, as the work of Australian Jewish writers of fiction testifies. Maria Lewitt, the author of the poem above, narrates in her autobiographical novel *No Snow in December* (1985), her 'conversion' to her new land. She is very ironical about this land at first, frustrated by the unbalance between her expectancies and the reality of

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Australia on discovery which falls way short of her dreams. And even when a beautiful landscape is reluctantly admitted as such, it is labelled as foreign. For quite some time Australia remains a remote, uninspiring country until, gradually, it becomes her beautiful, beloved home.

There are now several generations of Australian Jewish writers and not all of them are actually immigrants, but the descendants of immigrants, nor are they all survivors of the Holocaust but the children of Holocaust survivors, of intensely traumatized parents that are ashamed of having escaped the ultimate fate of their beloved families. The children, as they disclose their parents' scars in their writing, reveal that they themselves have a sense of guilt for not being able to share their parents' traumas.

Sylvia Irlicht, in an extensive article "The migrant experience in Australian Jewish writing", confirms the persistence of migration topics in the work of second generation writers of Jewish descent:

[N]ot all Australian Jewish authors who tackle the subject of migration are themselves newcomers to Australia. This theme is dealt with also by children of migrants who have grown to maturity in the adopted land, as well as by those of Anglo-Australian descent with third and fourth generation roots in this country" (Irlicht: 1988, 14).

An example of this is Harry Marks, a fourth generation Australian Jew. Having a long line of descent in Australia, Marks' view of the Holocaust was less painful than that of arrivals recently escaped from Hitler's furnaces. His novel *The Heart is Where the Hurt Is* (1966) delivers this message: No matter how much your parents suffered at the hands of the Nazis, no matter that they were persecuted, even killed, it is time to forgive and forget. This is the stance of the Jewish heroine of the novel who falls in love with a German boy, the son of Nazi sympathizers.

Maria Lewitt's first autobiographical novel, *Come Spring* (1980), tells a different tale when it describes, in the first person, the hardships suffered and risks taken in order to survive in Hitler's Germany, while her second novel, *No Snow in December*, set in Australia, is a positive narrative of initial surprise at the sight of the country, to the point of scorn, followed by understanding of and romance with the new country.

Some of Liberman's short stories, like "Two Years in Exile" (1988) and "Home" (1988), for instance, depict a mother, reminiscent of the mother in Waten's *Alien Son*, although Liberman's character is actually drawn, to a great extent, from the author's mother herself. Melbourne is, for this mother, "a tail torn from the rump of the world", "a Gehenna" (hell). She is sick with nostalgia, lost in a desolate exile. In the second of the stories this character is depicted as the most tragic kind of immigrant, the immigrant who absolutely refuses to start anew, yet cannot go back because there is nowhere to go back to. The city where she was born and where she had lived all her life has been wiped off the face of the earth.

In Corkhill's words quoted earlier: "Australian literature since the nineteenth century has concerned itself with [...the] sense of displacement, the loss of personal and cultural history" (Corkhill: 1994, 175). Indeed these concerns, feelings of exile, isolation, unfamiliar landscape, efforts to adjust are not exclusive of Jews: In their case, however, they were aggravated by

religious preoccupations, fear of arousing anti-Semitism, anxiety about the survival of their culture, not to speak of the impact of the Holocaust that has influenced so much of their writing.

In the early twentieth century ordinary difficulties were more acute for migrant women who seldom worked outside their homes. Living in greater isolation than their men, they, unlike their husbands, never learned the language properly, so they could not understand the society that was their new milieu. In Waten's *Alien Son*, it is the alienated mother who says to her son: "You belong to one world, I belong to another" meaning that there is no possible reconciliation of their points of view. She is anchored in her past while her son sails freely in his present.

In more recent days Peter Kohn's *Rachel's Chance* (1987) depicts the hardships and terrifying experiences of those Jews who found refuge in Shanghai during the Second World War, when all alternative doors had been closed in their faces. Rachel and her husband's later migration to Australia proves very positive; they soon feel well in this vast country where nobody enquires about their origins and they can move freely and unmolested.

Arnold Zable's *Jewels and Ashes* (1991) describes the author-narrator's search for his roots in Europe, a search for the jewels that the Nazis turned into ashes. One reason why he undertakes the journey is a desire to please his father, but he is mostly impelled by the force of his parents' experience transmitted to him from childhood. Zable, a second generation writer, speaking for himself and for others, says: "We were born in the wake of Annihilation. We were children of dreams and shadows, yet raised in the vast spaces of the New World" (Zable: 1991, 163). Set on reconstructing the family history, he goes in pursuit of the legacy of jewels and ashes left for him. He realizes that a decisive moment in the lives of his parents was the moment when they decided to emigrate. Eventually that decision would mean escaping the fate that befell the rest of their families, but although they indeed escaped, the tragedy of their families traumatized them as survivors, making Zable's father sick with grief and shame and his mother obsessed with the story she could tell if only anyone would just listen.

Zable would again touch the topic of the Shoah (a term used by Zable in preference to 'Holocaust') in *Café Scheherazade* (2001), set in the café of that name in Melbourne, in the haven of peace and security that Australia meant for Holocaust survivors. Some of them gather in this café and exorcize the demons of the past by recounting their incredible stories of escape and survival. Their conversations draw a convincing picture of what it took to evade the Nazi genocide where one third of the Jewish people were massacred.

The Shoah and the scars left by it reappear in Zable's recent novels, *The Fig Tree* (2002) and *Scraps of Heaven* (2004). The first of these two books is dedicated by the author to his son, wife and the four grandparents. He enlarges the dedication:

And to the woman who gave birth on 10 October 2001, on a sinking boat off the coast of Java. Her dream was to find refuge, a place for a new home. The boat was headed for Australia. Along with 350 fellow asylum seekers, she, and her newborn child, did not make it. (Zable: 2002)

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This foreword epitomizes Zable's interest in asylum seekers. Australia is faced with a considerable amount of illegal immigrants, asylum seekers who are often rejected or interned in detention centres for long periods until their cases are thoroughly revised

There is now in Australia considerable opposition and protests against the Government's policy in the treatment of these displaced persons and Arnold Zable is deeply involved in their cause. He bears in mind the sufferings and traumas of his own parents when they desperately tried to stay in Australia to escape the Nazi genocide and also to obtain visas for their families. His own mother and father managed to evade the Shoah, but the rest of the family perished. Zable is now intent on saving other lives and alleviating their suffering. He has been campaigning for this for many years as a novelist, a journalist and an academic. At the back of *The Fig Tree* the publisher's blurb reads:

At the heart of this book is Zable's understanding of our obligations to the wanderers among us, the dispossessed and the stateless. He makes a gift of their stories in *The Fig Tree*, celebrating the common threads of humanity that bind us all.

In the first story of *The Fig Tree*, "Telling Tales", the novelist compares the life of his son Alexander to that of a refugee child in a photo, a child with traumatized, glazed eyes (Zable: 2002, 8). The second tale, "Singing Eternity", is about his father. He draws a parallel between his father and a Chinese student and poet, both forced --in the past his father and in recent days the Chinese student-- to abandon their vocation to write in order to earn a living. The author wonders about the number of frustrated poets using their scarce free time to fill the gap between past and present with words. He calls them "the unsung balladeers of the city" (Zable: 2002, 31). The third tale, "The Record" is about his mother who went to the ends of the earth to escape from a "burgeoning storm" (Zable: 2002, 38). Till her last day she was obsessed with telling her story, if only somebody wanted to hear it. In the tale "The Fig Tree" Zable shifts his attention to his wife's Greek family, establishing a parallel between his mother in law and his own mother who were like sisters: "a hunch in the shoulders and the same resigned smile. And on both the look of women whose lives encompassed oceans, yet who were still in touch with a village past" (Zable: 2002, 66). In "The Ballad of Mathausen" Zable takes again the subject of extermination camps: "life stopped in an extermination camp" (Zable: 2002, 134). The legacy left from Mathausen is this: "to be alert to suffering and heed the cry of those in need; to cross the boundaries and to see the common humanity that lies beyond our tribal divisions" (Zable: 2002, 143). In "Walking Thesalonika", about the persisting dreams of extermination camps and the extremes of human behaviour, Zable quotes from Eli Wiesel: "There are stories that are meant to be transmitted. Not to tell them would be to betray them" (Zable: 2002, 165). Zable is now faithfully transmitting them.

*Scraps of Heaven*, set in 1958, explores the lives of Polish Jewish immigrants, survivors of the Holocaust and their struggles to forget their traumas and to make Australia their home, expanding on the childhood years of a boy who suffers because of his parents' traumas. The book, as the publisher's blurb at the back reads, is: "a celebration of survival, a reminder that all lives are to be lived and that scraps of heaven can be found everywhere".

Quoting from Irlicht again:

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An appraisal of the migrant experience reflected in post-World War II Australian Jewish literature [...] reveals that while not all the authors [...] have always been influenced by the same migratory concerns, most have, at some stage during their careers, given expression to circumstances of forced migration or displacement -- and in particular that caused by World War II -- which have affected them personally, irrespective of where they were born or brought up.

Thus crises of identity, patronisation, superiority, alienation, all bound together by optimism or pessimism, yet interwoven at times by a search for roots, are discernible in their writing (Irlicht: 1988, 15).

Although Irlicht's article, written in 1988, only dealt with "the migrant experience post-World War II", its considerations could be equally applied to the migrant experience before that war and up to present-day migratory movements.

The few instances offered in this paper have been chosen, among many others, to gain an insight into the reasons for immigration, into the struggles and pain attached to it but also into the benefits and positive results resulting from it, both for the immigrants and for the country that receives them. In the case of Australia, as was remarked before, both sides have benefited from what can be labelled as 'a traumatic experience'. Thus it might be appropriate to close this brief study on Jewish migrant writing on those remote shores with Rorabacher's words:

[...] natives do not absorb newcomers without being somewhat changed by them and [...] by every New Australian who finds a home, Old Australia is herself changed, to some degree, and in being changed is also generally enriched in manpower, in cultural patterns, in breadth of understanding. (Rorabacher: 1976, 14).

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<sup>i</sup> This story was not published until 1995 but it was written before the author's trip to Europe in 1932.

<sup>ii</sup> Leaving xenophobia aside, Australia, like many other countries, is now questioning the benefits of multiculturalism that seemed to be the panacea some years ago and is now showing its weaknesses.