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Serge Liberman. A story

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Abstract. A portrait of Serge Liberman, as I knew him, drawing parallels between his work as a physician and writer. As a storyteller Serge drew on many sources. My focus here is on his roots, as an emigrant, and as a doctor who practiced in immigrant neighbourhoods, Carlton and Brunswick. He wrote in the tradition of earlier Melbourne based immigrant Yiddish writers, Pinchas Goldhar and Bergner, exploring similar themes of displacement, exile and longing. He drew also on older traditions of Yiddish literature, writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer. But Serge was more forgiving of human foibles, less judgemental, a documenter of symptoms, both in the consulting room, and at the writer's desk. Here, I pay tribute to him, as one storyteller to another, in the form of a story about Serge, the storyteller, and friend.

Key Words: Serge Liberman, storyteller, physician, displacement, exile, longing.

Serge Liberman was a fellow writer. He was also my doctor. My GP: General Practitioner. It is an apt term. Serge *practiced* both medicine and literature. He approached his twin vocations in the same way.

As a doctor, he was meticulous and methodical. He erred on the side of caution. He took his time. He followed procedure. He practiced the old ways: Stethoscope. Taps on the chest. Blood pressure test. Hands pressed on the stomach, probing for the telling detail.

Whatever the symptoms, good or otherwise, Serge entered the findings into the records in his tiny handwriting. His medical scripts were almost illegible. After each consultation, he took his notes to the front desk to be fed into the computer.

In all his dealings with staff, he appeared polite and concise. I observed this many times as I sat in the waiting room before an appointment—Serge walking from his room, handing over the papers at the front desk, focused on his task, bar a quiet nod in my direction. He was on familial terms with his colleagues—his relationship leavened by a quiet warmth, yet tinged by an edge of shyness. The heart of the practice was an enduring medical partnership, and friendship, between Serge and Dr Magdy Ramzy, a Coptic Egyptian.

Then it was my turn to sit in his modest consulting room. First, the check-up, a specific problem to be dealt with, my annual blood tests. Serge noted the slightest deviation from the norm, and discussed them with me. He suggested follow ups to make sure all was in order.

Once the official business was over, we talked literature. I must confess we spent more time discussing books and writing, than we did on the consultation. Timewise the scales tipped decidedly to literature over medicine; but in truth, the two vocations, and disciplines, fed each other. Serge was a writer and physician who paid attention to human afflictions, whether of the body or spirit.

He was my father's physician too. As Meier Zable aged, Serge did house calls. Like father, like son: first Serge would fulfil his medical task. Then they would talk literature. Serge came calling in the afternoon, after his morning consultations. The streets of Carlton and the inner suburbs, were quiet in my father's final decades.

Not as they had been, back in the post-war years when our mothers and fathers, Serge and mine's alike, made their way from the Old World to what they called the New: seeking 'firmer shores' as Serge names it in the title of his first collection of stories. My family settled in working class, immigrant Carlton. Serge's in an equivalent suburb in bayside St Kilda.

Whenever he published a new book, Serge would present it to father. Inscribed to Mr Zable, in that characteristic small script of his. My father loved the stories. They spoke to him because they were modest, and because they depicted human suffering, and modest aspiration. With the occasional outburst, in some of his characters, of feverish messianic visions.

Meier once told me that Serge's stories reminded him of the works of I.L. Peretz, whose tales drew on Yiddish folklore, and on the little things in which life is writ large. Meier notated Serge's books in the margins like a Talmudic scholar. Father was a reader who conducted conversations, in writing, with his favourite writers, jotting his responses in the book, in notebooks, and on scraps of paper.

Picture the scene. Serge draws up to the house on 387 Canning Street. He steps out of the car, carrying his black medical kit: briefcase size, akin to a small suitcase. He climbs the four stone stairs of the single-fronted Victorian terrace, to the veranda. Meier is at his makeshift desk, the dressing table in the front room. The window looks out onto the median strip, graced by palms and poplars.

And yes, it is quiet. It is the paradox of gentrification. Carlton, the setting for several Liberman stories, had become middle class by the 1980s. Visiting my father, for Serge, was like stepping back in time, to the suburb as it was, when he first began practicing there.

Serge was at ease in the company of older people, and it appeared, more at home in times long past. Warsaw was his spiritual home. Before the catastrophe. Perhaps as far back as pre-WW1, when Peretz held court in literary Warsaw and mentored many young Yiddish writers. He grounded them in the history, ethics, and the scriptures and traditions of his people. Serge would have felt very much at home in this setting.

It is telling that Serge moved from the Carlton consulting rooms of the earlier years to a medical centre in Sydney Road, Brunswick, where he treated a new generation of immigrants. Many had recently emigrated from countries in the Middle East. In search of firmer shores.

They were first generation settlers, reminiscent, in their status, of the Jewish, Greek and Italian immigrants who populate Carlton and the inner suburbs in the immediate

post-war years. They lived alongside working class Australians, whose families had dwelt in these suburbs for generations.

Serge thrived in the Brunswick environment. He felt at home. He would drive in from Glen Iris, the middle class outer suburb where he lived, to a neighbourhood rich in diversity. Serge was a firm believer in free medical care. He bulk billed his patients, and earned their trust through his methodical ways.

Some of his patients repaid him with little gifts—figurines, miniature statuettes, of glass, ceramic and porcelain—that Serge loved collecting. *Chachkes,* he called them, in Yiddish, meaning toys, knickknacks. Little indulgences. Serge displayed them on the shelf of a book case in his consulting room.

Serge's medical practice grounded him. Working in Brunswick kept him touch with the everyday dramas, the small things. Human indulgences. The figurines reflected Serge's way of looking at things, and at people—the warts on the smooth skin, and the lesions in the soul.

There are things I did not, and still do not know about Serge. Despite our long friendship, and our many conversations, Serge was somewhat guarded. His manner was restrained. Even as we conversed, he seemed preoccupied. He appeared calm and somewhat dreamy on the surface, yet, you sensed that he was churning with complex and conflicting ideas, thoughts, and emotions. And you sensed the wistfulness, and his regrets and misgivings. There were things, it seemed, that Serge kept out of bounds. Or, perhaps, reserved for his stories.

His reticence was reflected in the way he dressed. I cannot recall much, if any, deviation, from his grey and beige V-necked jumpers, over a light blue shirt, and beige poplin trousers. Regardless of the weather or season. He did not care for outer appearances.

His inner world, and his overactive mind, was reflected in his writings. In his first collection of stories, published while Serge was in his thirties, he appears old before his time. His characters are acutely aware of the passing of time. They too seethe with the inner life. The outside world intrudes, from time to time, and when it does, it dazzles. Many of Serge's characters engage in internal monologues.

On the surface, it was the little things that drew Serge. The small afflictions and foibles, the self-doubts and thwarted ambitions, that, when added up, over years of storytelling, and six collections, ninety-seven tales by one count—made up an epic of the immigrant experience.

He was a pioneer in this respect, the heir of Melbourne based Yiddish writers, Pinchas Goldhar and Herz Bergner, who wrote tales of immigrant Jews of an earlier generation, often set in Carlton, St Kilda and the inner suburbs, in the 1920s through to the 1960s. Goldhar died in 1947. Bergner, who arrived in Melbourne in 1937, kept writing, until his death in the 1960s. Serge took up the baton soon after.

But to pigeonhole Serge as a writer of the immigrant experience, would be to diminish his achievement—it was also the universal human experience that Serge wrote of. His stories reflect his own questing. The small things give way to philosophical musings. His characters' grapple with the big questions.

Serge paints them with an underlying current of forgiveness. I would say he was more forgiving than Goldhar and Bergner, who often wrote with bitter irony, and with a suspicion of social climbers, and scorn for those who forsook their roots in their search for acceptance.

Serge did not sit in judgement. Instead, like the doctor he was, he recorded the symptoms. The telling signs. His stories can be viewed as consultations. Bearing in mind Serge as I knew him, his tales seem to imply—there for the grace of whoever, go I. Or indeed, there have I, in fact, gone. We are all in it together. Sit down. Roll up your sleeve. Open your shirt. Breath in deeply. Exhale slowly. And tell me. What ails you?

Bio note: Arnold Zable is an award winning writer, storyteller, educator, and human rights advocate. His books include *Jewels and Ashes*, (Scribe, 1991) which won five Australian literary awards, and depicts his journey to Poland to trace his ancestry. *Jewels and Ashes* was also published in the USA by Harcourt Brace in 1993. *Wanderers and Dreamers*, (Hyland House, 1998) is a book of tales that depict the history of Yiddish theatre in Australia. Zable's best selling novel, *Cafe Scheherazade*, (Text, 2001) depicts the lives of former refugees who now meet in a coffee shop in a seaside suburb in Melbourne. *The Fig Tree*, (Text, 2002) is a book of true stories set in Greece, Eastern Europe, inner Melbourne and outback Australia. *The Fig Tree CD*, a musical companion to the book, won the National Folk Recording award in 2004. His novel *Scraps of Heaven*, (Text, 2004) is set in the post-war immigrant community of the Melbourne suburb, Carlton. His latest novel *Sea of Many Returns*, was published by Text in June 2008. Arnold Zable's most recent book, Violin Lessons was published in August 2011 to critical acclaim.

Formerly a lecturer in the Arts Faculty in Melbourne University, Zable has worked in the USA, Papua New Guinea, China, and many parts of Europe and Southeast Asia, Zable is the author of numerous feature articles, columns, short stories, reviews and essays. His work regularly appears in *The Age* and a range of journals. He has written several works for theatre, and was a co-writer of the play *Kan Yama Kan*, in which asylum seekers tell their stories. Zable speaks and writes with passion about memory and history, displacement and community. He has conducted numerous writing workshops and has been a visiting lecturer in creative writing at Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, La Trobe and Victoria Universities. (Taken from Arnold Zable´s web page: https://www.arnoldzable.com.au/about-the-author/)