

ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion
www.archipelago.org

Vol. 5, No. 3 Autumn 2001

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Five Poems

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Recommended Reading: George Garrett, John Casey

Letters to the Editor: Sean C. Kelly, Matthew Jennett.
Exchange : Cynthia Tedesco and Renata Treitel

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Contributors

Kathryn Bernard is a writer and educator living in England. She has two sons and an English husband who is a retired professor of languages, and writes fiction and nonfiction. In her spare time, she travels as much as possible.

Benjamin Hale Cheever <Benjami200@aol.com> has published three novels, THE PLAGIARIST, THE PARTISAN, and FAMOUS AFTER DEATH. He edited THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHEEVER and has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and *The Ladies Home Journal*. His nonfiction book SELLING BEN CHEEVER, the preface of which appears in this issue, will be published by Bloomsbury in October. He is a Contributing Editor of *Archipelago*. His "Confessions of a Lover, Spurned" appeared in Vol. 1, No. 1, and "Come Here, I Want You," in Vol. 2, No. 4.

Georgiana Farnoaga teaches Romanian at UCLA. She is the translator (with Sharon King) of two recent books: THE PHANTOM CHURCH AND OTHER STORIES FROM ROMANIA (University of Pittsburgh, 1996) and FOOL'S TRIUMPH, Ioana Ieronim's poetry (Pitesti, Romania: Editura Paralela 45, 2000), which is also due out in the United States from Green Integer.

Lucy Gray <lucygray@earthlink.net> has been a photographer since 1991, when she began a family portraiture business. Her first book of photographs was ANIMAL FACES (The Nature Company, 1993; reissued recently

by the Discovery Channel and Dutton). Her work has appeared in *The New York Times* and *Sierra Magazine*. She has had solo and group shows at various galleries and in City Hall in San Francisco and New Haven; received grants from organizations including the Rockefeller Philanthropic Collaborative and the Windfall Foundation; lectured at California State University, Long Beach, and City College, San Francisco; and been the subject of several documentaries, including one about her project “Naming the Homeless,” a selection of which appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 4, No. 1. In 2000 she won the Millard Sheets Gallery New Photography Competition (Los Angeles) for “Katita Gossiping Backstage,” from the series “Balancing Acts: On Being Prima Ballerinas Who are Mothers.” Lucy Gray is represented by Jernigan Wicker Fine Arts, 161 Natoma Street San Francisco, CA 94105, (415) 512-0335. She is married to the writer and film critic David Thomson; they have two sons.

Ann McKinnon Kucera writes stories and essays, has finished two science fiction novels, including HARP UNSTRUNG (University Editions, W.Va., 1999), and is working on a third. She has also written “two slim volumes and a local history.” She is recently widowed and lives in a small old farm house in Maine.

Walt McDonald <walt.mcdonald@TTU.EDU> began writing poems and stories after a brief service in Vietnam. Among the eighteen collections of poems he has published are: ALL OCCASIONS (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); WHATEVER THE WIND DELIVERS: Celebrating West Texas and the Near Southwest. With photographs selected by Janet Neugebauer (Texas Tech University Press, 1999); BLESSINGS THE BODY GAVE (Ohio State University Press, 1998); COUNTING SURVIVORS (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); WHERE SKIES ARE NOT CLOUDY (University of North Texas Press, 1993); ALL THAT MATTERS: The Texas Plains in Photographs and Poems; photographs selected by Janet Neugebauer (Texas Tech University Press, 1992); THE DIGS IN ESCONDIDO CANYON (Texas Tech University Press, 1991); NIGHT LANDINGS (Harper & Row, 1989); AFTER THE NOISE OF SAIGON (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); RAFTING THE BRAZOS (University of North Texas Press, 1988); THE FLYING DUTCHMAN (Ohio State University Press, 1987); A BAND OF BROTHERS: Stories from Vietnam (Texas Tech University Press, 1989). More of his poems can be read in *Ploughshares* <<http://www.pshares.org/Authors/authordetails.cfm?prmauthorID=1949>> and *Tattoo Highway* <tattoohighway@yahoo.com>. Walt McDonald is Poet Laureate of Texas.

Doru Motz is a broadcaster, producer, and simultaneous interpreter for the Voice of America in Washington, D.C. As writer and translator, he has published over forty books and thousands of technical and informational articles. He is also a typographer and designer of fonts. Currently, he is working on translating into English fiction by the important Romanian novelist, Augustin Buzura, REQUIEM FOR MADMEN AND BEASTS.

Ileana Orlich is Director of the Romania Program at Arizona State University at Tempe. She has published essays on Romanian women poets, Marin Sorescu, Andrei Codrescu, twentieth-century and contemporary Romanian prose writers, as well as on Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Charles Simic and Stéphane Mallarmé. Her translations of Mihai Ursachi with Adam J. Sorkin appear in *Compost*, *West Branch*, and *Tampa Review*.

Adam J. Sorkin <ajs2@psu.edu> has published thirteen books of translations of contemporary Romanian poetry, most recently SEA-LEVEL ZERO, poems by Daniela Crasnaru (BOA Editions, 1999) and THE TRIUMPH OF THE WATER WITCH, prose poems by Ioana Ieronim (Bloodaxe, 2000). The latter was short-listed for the Weidenfeld Prize at St. Anne's College, Oxford, the second time in the six years of this prize Sorkin's translation work was selected a finalist; Liliana Ursu's THE SKY BEHIND THE FOREST (Bloodaxe, 1997, translated with the poet Tess Gallagher) was previously recognized. Sorkin's translation with Lidia Vianu of Marin Sorescu's deathbed volume, THE BRIDGE, is forthcoming from Bloodaxe.

Mihai Ursachi, writes his translator Adam J. Sorkin, “is one of Romania's most eminent writers, and, I believe, a great, neglected literary figure of world poetry today. Currently, he is Romania's Nobel Prize nominee in literature. Ursachi's work shows an often characteristic Romanian combination of mysticism and surreal symbolism; the religious intensity of his ‘poetry of being’ (his own term) makes his voice unusual and compelling. Ursachi defected from Romania in 1981 after having been imprisoned and put in solitary confinement for an earlier escape attempt when a university student in philosophy (swimming the Danube); he wound up in California (teaching swimming) and then Austin, Texas, where, while learning English (which he had not studied) and working as a garage mechanic (for which he'd had no training) and a German instructor at University of Texas, he put himself through graduate school, subsequently teaching part-time at the University

of California, La Jolla, for four years. Soon after the 1989 revolution that overthrew Romania's communist dictatorship, Ursachi declared that he was not an economic refugee and thus no longer had any reason to stay abroad. He returned to Romania in early 1990, serving until February 1992 as Director of the National Theater in the city of Iasi, a traditional cultural center of the northeast region of Moldavia, where he was born in 1941. He lost the National Theater post due to his open opposition to the Ion Iliescu government and to his allowing the Theater to be used for a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Great Pogrom of Iasi, which some influential politicians in the city claimed never took place. In 1992 Ursachi won the first national Mihai Eminescu poetry prize to be awarded since World War II. He continues to live in Iasi, where he has supported himself by heading the city's chapter of the Civic Alliance, a coalition of opposition intellectuals, and working as secretary of the Iasi Writers' Association and Professor of Poetry at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. In 1998 he published a career retrospective, *NEBUNIE SI LUMINA* (Bucharest, Editura Nemira), or *MADNESS AND LIGHT*, which will also be the title of a book of translations by Adam Sorkin now in progress. Ursachi's poetry has been published or is forthcoming in Sorkin's co-translations in *Nimrod*, *Alea* (with an essay on Ursachi), *Prism International*, *Artful Dodge*, *International Poetry Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *100 Words*, *Compost*, *Apostrof*, *The Montserrat Review*, *Exquisite Corpse /Cyber Corpse*, *Third Coast*, *Runes*, *River City*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Tampa Review*, *Archipelago*, and *West Branch* as well as in the anthology of poetry of Iasi, *CITY OF DREAMS AND WHISPERS* (Iasi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1998) and the 2001 Oxford University Press anthology, *GODS AND MORTALS: MODERN POEMS ON CLASSICAL MYTHS*."

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News of Our Contributors

Samuel Menashe, a selection of whose poems appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 5, No. 2, will read at the Library of Congress on Thursday evening, November 1, 2001, under the auspices of the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund. The Library of Congress <<http://www.loc.gov/>> is at 101 Independence Avenue, S.E., Washington, D.C. For information, telephone (202) 707-5000.

Thomas Crampton, whose photographs appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 4, No. 3, and who is a reporter and photographer for the *International Herald Tribune*, won the Certificate of Special Merit at the 2001 Human Rights Press Awards in Hong Kong "In recognition of an outstanding contribution toward greater awareness and appreciation of human-rights related issues." The winning article, with Crampton's photograph, was "A Tamil Guerrilla's Story, Starting at Age 7, A Child Fighter Describes Abduction and Training." An excerpt: "Jaffna, Sri Lanka – Shuffling her sandal-clad feet in the dust, 14-year old Arumuyam Malar confesses that she has been a naughty girl: she did not kill herself.

"Trained since the age of 7 to fight until victory or death and commit suicide upon capture, she did not have a cyanide capsule or grenade handy when Sri Lankan government troops overran the position she was defending several weeks ago. 'If I had had a grenade or cyanide capsule, I would have done it,' she said through a translator. 'I thought the army would kill me when I was caught.' The story of Arumuyam Malar, one of the youngest child soldiers captured alive by government forces in their 17-year war against the guerrilla fighters of the separatists Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, is a sad tale of abduction and lost childhood. Her story also reveals the methods employed by the rebels to recruit and train young children into their ranks. The Sri Lankan government claims that many Tamil Tiger guerrilla fighters are children, with nearly one third of the 5,000-strong force under the age of 18."

The full text can be read at <<http://www.iht.com/articles/30092.html>>.

Comix Decode is the collaborative group of graphic novelists including **Jessica Abel** and **Matt Madden**, a sample of whose work appeared in *Archipelago*, Vol. 5, No. 2. It was described by **Calvin Reid**; his conversation about electronic publishing with the Editor appeared in Vol. 4, No. 4. They announce: "Comix Decode is a collective of cartoonists and comix lovers devoted to spreading the word about the best in contemporary comics. Our main modus operandi is to get a few outstanding cartoonists together in a room, project their work on a screen while they read it, and then have an active and open discussion about it, with the cartoonists themselves acting as the panel of experts. For more, see: <http://www.artbabe.com/comixdecode/index.html>

"Comix Decode will hold an event in New York City, October 25 at North Sixth in Williamsburg, and feature CHARLES BURNS and TOM HART along with two other artists TBA. (We apologize to those who expected an event earlier, but this one should make up for it in sheer spectacularity!) All will be moderated by Calvin Reid, of course!"

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Letters to the Editor

On Katharine Graham (1917-2001), former publisher of the Washington Post:

To the Editor:

The news of Katharine Graham's death brought sadness, but it also brought to mind an encounter I had with this exceptional lady. She came to my aid after a dangerous accident on the job at her newspaper about a decade ago, when I was an editorial aide on the National News Desk.

During George Bush's presidency, about 8:50 p.m. on a weekday night in the hectic hours just before the first edition of the newspaper was put to bed, the phone rang. White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater was on the line, asking to speak with the Post's presidential reporter David Hoffman.

"How badly do you need him?" I asked.

"I really have to speak with him," he said. "It's important."

"He's at a party upstairs that Mrs. Graham is holding for a bunch of Russian diploids," I said. "Hold on, I'll run up and get him."

Off I went, leaving National Editor Jo Rector alone during one of the busiest parts of the night. I jogged to the elevator and took it up to the 8th floor, where Mrs. Graham's office is. Her large reception area was empty and across the room on the other side of floor-to-ceiling windows was her garden court, where the party was well under way. I hustled through the only door, out into the dimly torch-lighted area and found Hoffman.

"Fitzwater's on hold; he needs you pronto," I said.

Hoffman acknowledged and we both turned to go back downstairs. Knowing that Rector was by herself, I broke into a jog, and then it happened. Without ever seeing it, I blasted right through one of Mrs. Graham's big plate glass windows, nearly invisible because of the lighting. I remembered time slowed as I felt my face break through the glass. There was a tremendous crashing sound as I fell to the floor on top of shards.

I popped up in a panic, thoroughly embarrassed. I moved left then right and then I saw the blood – lots of it, pouring from my face. I pulled a shard of glass out of my arm and I felt part of my mouth hanging down. Then my senses returned, and I felt the situation was serious and out of my hands. Having been reared in a medical family, I knew it was important to relax and suppress the adrenaline.

The first person I recognized was my boss, Bob Kaiser. I told him I was sorry. And then Mrs. Graham came toward me at a trot, followed by Ben Bradlee and some of the paper's top editors, Len Downie, Karen DeYoung, and Kevin Klose. Behind them was a host of faces, some caring, some squeamish, all coming toward me.

Mrs. Graham took over, tending to my facial wounds, sending for an ambulance, directing DeYoung to call my wife. Ben Bradlee brought over a chair and there I sat, staring at a crowd of noted journalists and Russian diplomats, bleeding profusely and mortified that I had just brought Mrs. Graham's party to a smashing halt.

The ambulance arrived in no time. I was eased onto a gurney and wheeled away from the scene by medical technicians, with Mrs. Graham in tow. She was by my side, watchful and reassuring. And then, to my surprise, Mrs. Graham tried to climb into the ambulance with me and ride down to the emergency room at George Washington Hospital.

"You can't come in here," one of the technicians told her.

Wait a minute, I thought. You can't tell Mrs. Graham no. But she quietly acquiesced and made her own way to the hospital, calling her personal physician in the meantime to inquire about the plastic surgeons who were on call at GW that night.

Mrs. Graham was there to greet my wife when she arrived at the hospital and waited until Cathy had checked me in and the doctor was on his way before she left. Before she did, she gently quizzed my wife about whether she had everything we would need. "You're sure," she repeated. "Do you need any money?" referring to any prescriptions that would be filled before going home.

The next day, when I learned of the exchange, I told my wife she was the second person that night to tell Mrs. Graham no. That didn't happen very often. Then the phone rang, and there she was again: Mrs. Graham checking in to see if there was anything else she could do. A few days later, she sent a hand-written note.

I healed quickly and, about a week after the accident, went into the newsroom to say hello to everyone and to thank those who had helped me during my trauma. When it came time to see Mrs. Graham, she looked me over carefully and smiled, saying the wounds were healing nicely.

She gave me a warm embrace and I departed, passing by the very window that gave me the scare of my life, but that I can still remember fondly because it brought Mrs. Graham and me together for a brief time.

Sean C. Kelly <skelly@amicapital.com>

Sean Kelly is a Washington, D.C.-based writer, actor, and stuntman.

Good work:

To the Editor:

I learned of your journal through one of the library listserves, and wanted to write to say I am very impressed. I was in the book business for many years before crossing over to library work. I believe the direction you are taking represents the best use of technology which, in the spirit of McLuhan, enhances the arts I love so well.

Keep up the good work. I will spread the word wherever I can.

Sincerely,

Matthew Jennett <acgrarebooks@hol.gr>

Matthew Jennett is Curator of Special Collections, Rare Books & Archives at The American College of Greece.

An Exchange of Letters: Cynthia Tedesco and Renata Treitel

Cynthia Tedesco's story "Suitcases" and Renata Treitel's translations of the poems of Rosita Copioli appeared in Archipelago, Vol. 5, No. 2. This exchange of e-mail letters came out of that occurrence-Ed.

From: Cynthia Tedesco

Date: Fri, 03 Aug 2001

To: Renata Treitel

Dear Renata,

I just wanted to write to you to tell you how magnificent your translations of Rosita Copioli's poems are. I believe every poem is a translation and that every translation

is another poem to be treasured when done so beautifully as yours. I'm going to get these works from your publisher if I can (I'll head over to 'Resources' soon).

We are fortunate indeed to have Katherine and all the people associated with Archipelago. 'Burden Of Silence' is a work of tribute that honors you, as well.

All Good Things,
Cynthia Tedesco

From: Renata Treitel

To: Cynthia Tedesco

Hi Cynthia Tedesco,

How nice of you to get in touch to praise my work as translator and as writer. It's good to be recognized by one's peers, reason enough to keep plodding on.

In return, I have to say that I was struck by your story. I made notes for myself as I was reading it: "like a fairy tale" "strange things happen and they are all acceptable" "what is quite tragic takes on a Chagall-like atmosphere" "levity, light-heartedness" "child-like quality" "a certain naivete." What is even more interesting to me is that you choose a Jewish theme set in Italy and mix miracles and religions and traditions within a single religion. And even more puzzling, you mention geographical places I am quite familiar with, i.e. Bologna, Varalla Sesia, Mt. Rosa. And even more puzzling, you speak of the "Navarra Province." Here I had to stop. Navarra, as you know, is in Spain. However, there is a small town in northern Italy, half way between Milan and Turin. The name of the town is Novara and we speak of the Province of Novara. It so happens I did live in Novara, many years ago. And from Novara you can see Mt. Rosa, so called because at sunset it turns pink.

These are details that do not change the story. However, I wonder, how did you happen upon such a story and upon such geographical places? I lived in Novara with an uncle of mine and his family whose name happens to be Tedeschi. Not very different from your last name. And also you mention the name of Alemanno which is synonymous with Tedesco.

All of this sounds like another improbable story but it is all true. If you do not think me too nosy, perhaps you can illuminate further.
Thank you for getting in touch.

Renata

PS - On second thought, I am sending a copy of this to the editor of *Archipelago*, because she is part of an interesting happening.

From: Cynthia Tedesco

Date: Tue, 07 Aug 2001

To: Renata Treitel

Dear Renata,

Thank you for your kind reply! You are amazing. This is my mother's story as she told it to my sister and me when we were little. My mother was born and raised in Bologna, and visited all the places I write about in 'Suitcases,' some on the very day she was burnt by the chef's pot of boiling water. My grandmother did say all that is said. My mother's response was as written. Cabbages did save her leg and life. Mt. Rosa was active during her illness.

I have been to Italy twice and only once to Bologna. That was when I was 17 yrs. old and lived with family for a month. My mother was raised in various prisons in and

around Bologna because my grandfather was the minimal security prisons' warden. She went to The Univ. of Bologna for two years, married a Brooklyn boy studying Medicine, and came here when he graduated and returned to set up practice with his brothers. Life did not turn out the way expected. He died suddenly at age 27 and my mother was trapped here stateside because of the war. (My mother's older brothers and the rest of the family were in the Resistance. My aunt forged passports to assist Italian Jews to get out of Italy. I am in the midst of writing that story, or stories.) They had a child, my stepbrother, and that is another story, Renata. I call that story 'Paint' and if you wish I will send you a copy.

Sorry this is taking so long... my mother eventually married my father, who is of Russian-Jewish background. Thus, my sister and I are 'Jew-Woppies!' Please do not be horrified by that term: we do not think it pejorative. My parents only argued about religion, although my sister and I essentially grew up without any. Thus I am totally absorbed by the mystical traditions of all religions. I became a Catholic when I was 16 in secret, on my own. But I'm not a very good one at all. Heresies are my favorite subject, along with Mysticism and Gnosticism, etc. etc.; besides, part of me is very Jewish, and I simply cannot fathom Christ as anything other than Jewish: Essene perhaps, even married to the Magdelene, etc. An unmarried Rabbi? I doubt it.

My mother's maiden name is Gozzi, the family originally came from Venice and then to Milan and on to Bologna. Just outside of Venice there is a rubble, Castle Gozzi. Of course there is a family crest, however tacky and distant from the Doge. My maiden name is Kane, from Kanefsky. My husband's the Tedesco. Now: the passport of his grandfather or great-grandfather is 'Tedeschi.' And why it was changed is a family mystery! I've heard Tedeschi is a Jewish Italian name and this of course aroused my curiosity. But both my in-laws died very young, and we can't track 'the truth' down. My husband grew up in the house his ancestors built, on Roslyn, L.I. – a more Jewish neighborhood is hard to find. He was raised as Catholic. He has no interest in religion: but fortunately is interested in my Heresies and of course, the writing. That Alemanno is synonymous with Tedeschi/Tedesco meaning 'German' or of Germany, etc., was news to me. I cried when I read your e-mail. I've many poems dedicated to Rabbi Johanan Alemanno, Alchemist and Kabbalist and Hebrew tutor to Pico della Mirandola. He has been like an 'unseen' guide to me for so many years now. I first read about him in Rafael Patai's 'Jewish Alchemists.' Since then I have 'used him' shamelessly in poems and fiction. He lived for a time in Bologna, as did Rabbi Patista or Batista; Patai is not sure of the spelling. That the air is pink around Mt. Rosa is of no surprise to me: my photos of Italy, particularly of Venice are all tinged pink. Miracles everywhere.

Please keep in touch. I can't wait until your books come. They're taking forever, it seems. I'm taken by writers' block with 'Suitcases' surrounded by so much talent and gifted authors. Truly!

All Good Things,
Cynthia

From: Renata Treitel

To: Cynthia Tedesco

I wish to add that 50 Km. from Novara there is a town called Varallo, which is the main centre of the Valsesia, a pre-Alpine tourist region. I read in my guide book that in 1944 and 1945 the Valsesia was an important center of partisan resistance. Bloody encounters took place in the nearby region of Alagna on June 5, 1944. The main valley in

this area is called Val Grande which ends at Alagna Valsesia at the foot of Mt. Rosa (alt. m. 4633). Mt. Rosa is the highest peak, after Mt. Bianco, in Europe.

Warm regards,
Renata

From: Cynthia Tedesco

Date: Tue, 07 Aug 2001

To: Renata Treitel

PS: Thank you for your meticulous knowledge of the geography of my stories. What guide book do you have? I've tried to obtain guide books on Bologna, the entire Emilia-Lombardy area and North of it, and can't come up with anything but cookbooks. Please advise, I'm desperate.

From: Renata Treitel

To: Cynthia Tedesco

Dear Cynthia,

It is quite an extraordinary story. So life is more varied than fiction.

I am sorry I have caused you so much upheaval with my remarks. But the story had a special appeal.

Do send me your other story.

You belong to the *Archipelago* crowd with no apologies.

Best, Renata

From: Cynthia Tedesco

Date: Thu, 09 Aug 2001

To: Renata Treitel

Dear Renata,

Thank you for all the information. I'm going to pursue the Guide A.S.A.P. 'Paint' will be on its way soon. Very different from 'Suitcases' although about many of the same people with other masks.

All Good Things,

Cynthia

Cynthia Tedesco <cynick@earthlink.net> is the author of a collection of poetry, LETTERS FOUND AFTER... (Sesquin Press, 1997), and a former editor of Barrow Street. "Suitcases" appeared in Archipelago, Vol. 5, No. 2.

Renata Treitel's <Rtreitel@aol.com> poem "The Burden of Silence" appeared in Archipelago, Vol. 4, No. 3. Her translations from the Italian of poems by Rosita Copioli, FURORE DELLE ROSE/WRATH OF THE ROSES, appeared in Vol. 5, No. 2. She is also the translator of Rosita Copioli's SPLENDIDA LUMINA SOLIS / THE BLAZING LIGHTS OF THE SUN (Sun and Moon Press). This year, she was first runner up of the Bordighera Poetry Prize. Poems from her manuscript OKLAHOMA BAROQUE together with comments by Dorothy Barresi, judge, will be featured in Italian American Writers <<http://www.ItalianAmericanWriters.com>>. She adds this note: "There is one detail I would like to call your attention to. When Cynthia Tedesco writes: 'Mt. Rosa was active during her [mother's] illness,' this cannot be true because Mt. Rosa is not a volcano. However, because the story was told by grandmother to mother to daughter an error might have crept in. There are three major volcanoes in Italy: Vesuvio, Stromboli, Etna. Any one could have been active at the time. I mention this for accuracy, in case anybody wants to follow this story further."

Balancing Acts: On Prima Ballerinas who are Mothers

Lucy Gray

Photographs and Text

For the past two years I have photographed three prima ballerinas who are mothers at San Francisco Ballet. They are Tina LeBlanc, Katita Waldo and Kristin Long. Each of these women has a towering strength both physically and emotionally. No matter how many years she has been with a company, a dancer takes a class before she starts work. Lunch is an unnecessary aside when there is a dance to be learned or rehearsed. A late lunch is far less important than a visit with a physical therapist or with her child. And a dancer can't eat before she performs at night. It'd make her sick. Instead, she drinks water, water and more water. A dancer does sweat all day and through the night when she's dancing. The water keeps her from getting dehydrated and it fills her tummy. Where the rest of us have dessert, a prima ballerina has ambition.

A ballerina's drive has to be exceptional among dancers if she is to become a principal with the company. There is a profound reward for a dancer who makes it to the top, such that I think it's nearly impossible for the rest of us to appreciate fully. The daring that live performance excites and the satisfaction in having an exchange with an audience is so great that the one true terror for a prima ballerina is that her career will end. Having a baby is one way she can choose to curb her fear. She wouldn't mind her career being over quite so much if she could go home to a family. There's a future to which she could look forward. Not that having had a baby means she is ready to leave.

Until recently ballerinas at major companies were dropped if they had a child. There were only a rare few exceptions until 1987 when a lawsuit against San Francisco Ballet prompted AGMA, the dancer's union to create the leave of absence clause. The clause is in the template from which all members of AGMA negotiate their contracts with the companies. It's also true, but for a very few rare exceptions, that a ballerina couldn't be taken seriously if she was also a mother. These days the director of a company is more worried about injuries than image. Helgi Tomasson, the director of San Francisco Ballet, let me come and make a book observing the fact that these three ballerinas are also mothers. If the ballerinas wanted to participate, he'd help. And so he did, by allowing his publicity staff to escort me backstage for performances, by allowing me into any rehearsal, including his own, and by allowing the dancers' children to visit during rehearsals and performances.

The pictures in this series are mostly from a Paris tour San Francisco Ballet took in May 2001. They were not included in the ninety-page book proposal now making its way around New York. Unfortunately, you will have to wait for the book to be published to see all three dancers. I have chosen a sequence of thirteen pictures that give a dancer's slice of life. The dancer here is Kristin Long.

Captions follow the sequence of photographs, on page 25.



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



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Lucy Gray Photography



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Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography



Lucy Gray Photography

- Page 12:* An elegant place to flop for a few minutes in the Palais Garnier Theater after rehearsal and before Kristin is to pick up her son, Kai. It's got to be a thrill to dance in a theater where the pillars in the warm-up room are painted gold and the couch covered in velvet and the ceilings are ... twenty-feet high?
- Page 13:* Kristin now has Kai in the stroller. The Cannes Film Festival was on at the same time as San Francisco Ballet was performing in Paris. A ballerina will never be celebrated in the way of a movie actress even if the dancer's skill is far more exacting, her talent more keenly developed, her abilities more rare.
- Page 14:* Kristin and Kai meet husband/dad, Michael Locicero, in the street on the way to their hotel. Michael has given thirteen massages today to dancers at the ballet. He is exhausted but he will come to the dress rehearsal tonight. He and Kai watch most of Kristin's performances.
- Page 15:* Back at the hotel near the theater Kristin and Kai get ready for tonight.
- Page 16:* In their dressing room at the Palais Garnier Kristin considers an updo with principal dancer Julie Diana, as Kai and his aunt Gloria (Michael's sister) play with a red balloon. There is also a beautiful upright piano to the left that Kai was playing earlier.
- Page 17:* Tonight is dress rehearsal. The press sits out front, where the audience will be tomorrow night – opening night – which will be greeted by rave reviews in local papers in Paris and San Francisco. London press is also here in preparation for stories they will write when San Francisco Ballet tours their Royal Ballet Theater in August.
- Page 18:* None of us were allowed backstage at the Palais Garnier. But I wanted you to see what it's like for the dancer. (Kristin is actually on stage at the San Francisco Opera House.)
- Page 19:* Out front you can never catch a dancer's need for precision. You can only be astonished by her accomplishment. Kristin's leg is held here by Zachary Hench.
- Page 20:* So you can never know her risks.
- Page 21:* Nor her feeling of flight.
- Page 22:* This is what Kristin's dancing looked like out front at the Palais Garnier. She's the one in the middle, sixth from the left.
- Page 23:* And afterwards, Helgi Tomasson gives Kristin a pointer or two. She was in his dance tonight, called *Prism*. One reason I think ballerinas make great mothers, on the whole, is because they spend their days learning.
- Page 24:* It's nearly midnight. At last, dinner! Michael wanted to take us somewhere nice. Kai was still going strong. Kristin, who'd dressed several hours earlier when it was hot, was cold. Michael's sister, Gloria, was tired. She'd taken care of Kai all day while the others worked. Still, she doesn't look bored with him. Gloria is a brick in this family. And what family doesn't need a brick?

SELLING BEN CHEEVER

Benjamin H. Cheever

In January of 1997, when I was training to be a car salesman, another man and I used to spend the afternoon coffee break together. “When you *want* to become a car salesman, does that mean you’ve hit the bottom of the barrel?” he said, finally, without meeting my eye.

“No,” I said, “it depends on what kind of salesman you turn out to be.” I still believe that. There was quality at the auto store, at CompUSA and even at Nobody Beats the Wiz.

There were stinkers, too, of course, but they were also interesting to me. I was a stranger, a foreigner in the service economy. I’ve lived most of my life in Westchester County and on Manhattan Island, which is where I took the jobs for this book, and yet I feel that in researching this book, I have traveled a great distance. I’d always stood on the other side of the counter. I’d always been the one with the money. I’d always been the mark.

I was raised to disdain sales. When I went to work after college in 1970 as a reporter at *The Rockland Journal-News* in Nyack, N.Y., I looked down on the advertising salesmen, even though they worked upstairs. I started at \$100 a week. I believe they started at \$115, and earned more if they actually sold advertising.

So why did I finally step through the looking glass? How did I make the transition from Senior Editor at *The Reader’s Digest* and a corner office in the Pan Am Building (now Met Life) to the all-polyester suit of a Burns Security Officer?

Research? Yes, and no.

I wanted to write. In 1988, I left my job at *The Reader’s Digest*, set out on my own, published a book of my father’s letters.

I then wrote a novel, and for those of you who think nobody will turn down a book with Cheever at the top of the page, I’m here to tell you they’re out there. By the dozens. Ultimately, I cleared that hurdle, had one novel published, then a second. Three’s the charm. The third would be my “break-out book.”

My publisher’s imprint, Atheneum, was closed down. He was not offered another one. I was sorry, because Lee Goerner had become a friend. I was not *that* sorry. I was free now to go to any publisher I chose. The first two books had gotten a good deal of positive critical attention. And as long as I had a publisher, other publishers were *very* friendly, practically lascivious. “If you are ever unhappy,” they said, “give us a call.” Wink, wink.

Lucky them, I thought. Lucky me. I finished my third novel. It was sent out. There would certainly be a bidding war.

No bidding war ensued. Not a shot was fired. Not an offer made. Not one.

So maybe the book wasn’t perfect. Some editor would roll up his sleeves, her sleeves. Working together we’d make a masterpiece. That’s what I thought. No sleeves were rolled. It’s not as if they hadn’t read my other books, either. They had. And it’s not as if they didn’t know what I could do. They did know what I could do. Some editors liked my first two novels and thought the third wasn’t as good. Some editors didn’t like any of my novels at all.

I'd strutted my stuff and left the world strangely unimpressed. I was reminded of the middle-aged flasher I'd seen in court when I was a reporter. He'd gone to the playground, flipped open his raincoat. The teacher was alerted by the sound of children laughing.

Being a *Digest* editor had seemed foolish sometimes, but never this foolish. At least I hadn't been alone. There were dozens of *Digest* editors. You could see us in the cafeteria or in the parking lot at night. Failed novelists don't have a cafeteria. If you are a novelist who can't get published, are you really a novelist at all?

As a writer with a rejected novel, I was very much alone. As a man who'd spent decades preparing himself to do something unwanted, I was not. This was in 1995. Forty-three-million jobs had been eliminated between 1979 and 1995, according to *THE DOWNSIZING OF AMERICA*, the book based on the 1996 *New York Times* series.

It was happening all over. Mike, the proprietor of Pleasantville's You Can't Believe It's Yogurt, told me that he had been at Avon, then the Post Office. Now the yogurt store was failing as well. A man who had been a Vice President when I was a junior editor at the *Digest* turned up to paint a mutual friend's condominium in Somers, New York.

So I put together a proposal. I'd write a book about downsizing. I'd play out everybody's worst nightmare, take entry-level jobs. While writing the proposal, I was a sidewalk Santa, trained to be a tax preparer for H & R Block, worked for Burns Security and sold computers. "They're going to love this," I thought. "I'm actually doing something now!"

Nobody liked the proposal.

"You're a writer," they said. "You're not out of work. Your distress isn't genuine." They were wrong. My distress was genuine.

Some editors checked on the success of my two novels and found that, despite good reviews, the books hadn't sold very well. So apparently I was a failure as a writer, but I still wasn't out of work. Figure that one out and you win the Catch 22 John Yossarian Prize with gold-leaf cluster.

Finally, Adam Bellow – then at the Free Press – bought the proposal. (Yes, we knew each other. Two sons of famous writers. And yes, we were friends.)

Still, I was haunted by the comments of editors who hadn't liked the proposal. Was I qualified to write this thing? I'm not an authority. Nowadays we have respect for two sorts of authorities: those who are experts, and those who are authentic.

I'm certainly not an expert. When I think of experts, though, I remember Dr. Stuart M. Berger. I met him only once and that was at a dinner party. He was hunched over an enormous bottle of champagne, the type you see in the windows of liquor stores during the high holidays. The bottle came almost to my waist: it came to the doctor's knees. Berger was a tall man, over six and a half feet. He was trying to get the cork out, but he was having difficulties because the smoke from the cigarette in his mouth was drifting up and into his eyes.

When I offered to help, Berger explained that he'd recently thrown out his back. The doctor, in case you've forgotten, was a famous health writer. He wrote a health column for the *New York Post*. His books included *THE SOUTHAMPTON DIET* and *DR. BERGER'S IMMUNE POWER DIET*. When the man who claimed to know how to live to be 100, died at the age of 40, he weighed 365 pounds.

Don't get me wrong: I liked Dr. Berger. He gave me a couple of his cigarettes. Nor was he as anomalous as we might suppose. J.I. Rodale published health magazines and said he expected to live to be 100 "unless I'm run down by a sugar-crazed taxi driver." Rodale said this on the Dick Cavett show and died right then and there of a heart attack.

It's not just the diet gurus, either. When I was at *The Reader's Digest*, we employed a man who wrote compelling articles about how you could fall in love endlessly with the exact same woman: your wife. My then-wife and I were exquisitely unhappy, so I took his teachings very much to heart. There were tricks and maxims, stirring tales from personal experience. I was shocked, therefore, when I met the writer and learned that he was on his fifth wife.

Certainly some experts do know what they're talking about, although few of them write best-selling books. In any case, I'm not an expert.

Am I authentic? It depends upon what you mean by authentic. Movie stars become authentic through struggles with drugs or alcohol. Writers often become authentic by recalling some harrowing or splendid "true life incident."

THE EDUCATION OF LITTLE TREE is the story of a boy brought up by Cherokee grandparents. First published in the 1970s, it was later reissued as an overlooked masterpiece. Schools interested in a window on Native American Culture made it required reading. "A true story by Forrest Carter" reads the 1985 paperback, which I own. But it wasn't written by Forrest Carter. It was written by Asa Carter, an ex-Ku Klux Klansman. Probably he wasn't brought up by any Indians. Certainly not the Indians in that book. Why? Because those Indians are too good to be true.

Well, this particular Indian is not too good to be true. If I have a problem, it's that I'm not good enough to be true, or at least not good enough to be a writer. Not when you compare my work to my father's work – which, of course, everybody does.

Since I began this project, my third novel has been published, but I still have bragging rights as a failure. I'm a natural-born bust.

Perfect strangers praise me for the courage to allow my prose to be compared with that of my father. What, exactly, was my alternative?

I wanted to write. Do want to write. You have to run the race, don't you? Even if you're sure to lose.

My wife, a *New York Times* critic, is also markedly successful. As is my sister, Susan. I'm haunted by the image of a knot of bored and restless people standing near a berm of freshly turned earth and beside an open grave. Head bowed, one mourner turns to another and whispers, "Ben's life does seem to have been designed to excite unflattering comparisons."

No, I'm not out of money: but I do know shame.

Besides which, work is about identity almost as much as it's about cash. People without jobs are people without status. The unemployment rate is universally accepted as a misery quotient.

When I began to hold jobs, I felt real again, a creature with weight and legitimate needs. When I was working, I was authentic.

Were my experiences on the job real? I think so. Plus, my financial security gave me the freedom to write about them. Had I actually roasted in economic hell, I might not have been willing to report on it. Shame is a central component of failure, and with shame comes silence. Nobody sends a letter to the alumni magazine to announce that he has failed to make partner. I have a number of acquaintances who lost jobs while I was writing this book. "Tell me everything," I always asked them. With few exceptions there would be radio silence, unbroken until the new position was landed. The dead waters, the interviews that didn't pan out, the sobriety jobs, went unreported.

There certainly were fill-in jobs to be had in 1995. I saw them posted in the windows of the stores at which I shopped. I started walking into those stores and asking for job applications. This didn't feel good, like the first time you go to the hospital, and

you're not bringing chocolates or flowers, you're bringing a suitcase with your very own pajamas in it.

Yes, yes, I told them who I am. Benjamin Cheever, former *Reader's Digest* editor, former novelist. Nobody ever said, "You're too good for us." Mostly they asked if I would work nights and weekends. And for a urine sample.

There seemed to be a lot of people starting again at square one, not because they were researching a book, but in an attempt to make a living and also to have some place to go in the morning.

When published as a book, *THE DOWNSIZING OF AMERICA* wasn't a success. "It tanked," a friend in publishing told me. Is this because we don't want to deal with failure? I think not. I think the book flopped because it only played down at the low end of the keyboard. Magnificently written, scrupulously researched, it was nevertheless a litany of complaint.

Feeling sorry for oneself can make good copy, but very few people feel sorry for themselves all the time. They get out of bed in the morning, they make coffee, and they go to work. They make love. They laugh about their troubles. One of my colleagues in car sales was a former IBMer. When he was explaining why he lived so far north, he said, "I moved there to get near my job. Then they fired me." Then he laughed. We all laughed. It was funny.

I never held a job, for a month, for a day, that didn't alter my personality.

This is not to make myself out as a hero. It's difficult for a writer to be a hero, because he's always thinking: "Wait till the world hears how badly I was treated." Punch a reporter in the face and he'll think, "That's a Marine Corps ring he's hitting me with. The globe and anchor. Nice detail." The heroes of this book are the ones who didn't expect to be written up.

The men and women who were kind to me on these jobs, they didn't do it for attention, they did it because they were kind. The ones who were cruel, might not have been so cruel, if they'd known I would write about it.

Was my approach underhanded? Yes and no.

I could have gone in and identified myself as a writer reporting a book. Probably I wouldn't have been hired. Even if I had been hired, it would have been an entirely different story.

Or I could have simply interviewed people. But that would have been a different story also. I would have had to ask permission. The people who want to be interviewed are a self-selected group and by no means representative.

When I was working at *The Rockland Journal News* in the early 1970s, it was widely believed that economic conditions were so dire that senior citizens were eating dog food. Legislators, both local and national, would refer regularly to these old people and their irregular diet.

I had contacts in welfare rights and Legal Aid, and so finding the local angle on the dog food story didn't seem impossible. I got some tips, but the closest I came to a starving elder was a woman of about my own age who'd had her electricity shut off. She was living in subsidized housing, an apartment at least as comfortable as the one I was then in. She was good-looking, a single mom, taking college courses. There was an air conditioner in every window. She was allergic, it turned out, and her electric bill exceeded the utility allowance set by the Rockland County Department of Social Services.

I'm not an allergist, and it could well have been that her distress was completely genuine. Still this wasn't a story they would run on the wires. It wasn't a story at all. I wanted some old gent with his grizzled chin three inches away from a bowl of Alpo.

Maybe there weren't any senior citizens eating dog food in the county. My guess is that if there were any, they didn't want their picture in the newspaper.

The lens of public attention attracts a certain brand of person; and in America, at least, those people seem unusually good at finding their own lunch.

Sometimes a subject will distort his story; sometimes the media does it for him. Often it's a collaboration. We had a photographer who carried a woman's high-heeled shoe in the trunk of his car. Fortunate enough to chance upon a ghastly auto crash, he'd put that shoe in the foreground before he took the picture.

He and I worked together once on an article about the local emergency food cupboard.

The photographer went out to take a picture of the cupboard. When he got there and opened the cupboard, it was crammed with food. So our photog, he turned to the woman who administered the program and said, "Now, this is a story about an empty cupboard. I'm going out to the car to get fresh film. When I come back, if the cupboard is empty, we'll have a picture and a story. If it's not empty, you got no picture and no story."

Now there are some enormously talented interviewers, but these are rare. To complete a good interview is just about as easy as it is to take an oyster out of its shell, and still have a live oyster.

I'm not that talented. Besides which, the interviewer has to be tougher than I like to be. He must seem always to go along with his subject's vision of himself (usually heroic, always sympathetic) and yet be willing to present a more accurate picture.

"Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible." So wrote Janet Malcolm in her starkly honest book, *THE JOURNALIST AND THE MURDERER*.

There is another sort of information out there – and, no, it's not objective. Nor is it scientific. It's the kind of commonsense information we all get from simply living a life. When you're buying electronics, for example, watch for the spiff; and if you're leasing a car, then multiply the monthly payments over the length of the contract. Always check the math yourself. And above all remember what a friend told me on the floor at CompUSA: "It's a small world: so don't make enemies."

So instead of interviewing people about their troubles, I thought I'd share their troubles and see what they'd say to a colleague.

This book's greatest failing is that it's turned into such a personal story. I'm the character I talk most about. So it seems as if I'm the only character who matters. Please know that this is not what I think. It wouldn't have been fair, though would it – or legally advisable – to reveal everybody else's life as if it were my own? Instead I've had to reveal my own life as if it were everybody else's.

The stories I found, like my own story, seem sad to me and funny. And yet the most shocking revelation is a cheering one, or at least I found it cheering. We like to pretend that failure and extinction are synonymous. People fired by *The Reader's Digest*, or even by *The Rockland Journal-News* were referred to ever after as if dead. We didn't just lose contact with our colleagues, we lost sympathy. We lost interest.

"The opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is indifference," according to Rollo May. We didn't damn our former colleagues to hell; we damned them into a state of un-being.

Meanwhile those who succeeded became the subject of feverish curiosity. Cruelty, alcoholism, adultery and the wildest eccentricities are beloved in the man or woman who

rises through the ranks. Aberrations aren't just forgiven; they are cherished and sometimes even imitated.

Guess what? The failures haven't vanished in a puff of smoke. They're out there. Not always sad, either. Rarely repentant.

Failure is supposed to keep its chin clean. Failure is expected to know the forks. Failure should be solemn and upright – and silent. “Really, if the lower orders can't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?” says Algernon of his servant Lane in *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*.

Oscar Wilde lived in England, you say. The English have a class system. And we don't? “Class in America is a joke,” the poet Donald Hall once wrote,” but it is not funny.”

So what I've been doing for the last five years is eating dog food in discreet little bites.

Almost three million people are laid off every year, according to Richard Nelson Bolles, whose book *WHAT COLOR IS YOUR PARACHUTE?* boasts over six million copies in print. Eloquent testimony not just to the excellence of the text, but also to the seriousness of the problem.

Sundays, during 1995 and 1996, I often took my two sons to the McDonald's in Thornwood, New York, for breakfast. When I began work on this project, I brought *The Tarrytown Daily News* along and read the classifieds. One day, having been back to the counter to complain about how my elder boy's Breakfast Burrito smelled, I returned to find a stranger collecting my newspaper. He was a small man with a moustache, in a short-sleeved wash-and-wear shirt, necktie, jacket and hat. I told him that it was my newspaper, but that he could have it. “All but this,” I said, and waved a hand at the want ads.

The man looked at me; then he laughed. It was a long laugh, dry and almost entirely without mirth. There I was in my expensive sweatshirt, with my blond boys, and I suppose he thought: “Maybe some day I will be his boss.” That's the American dream, then: half nightmare. The song: “America the Beautiful.” The game: musical chairs. The tempo has never been so frantic.

Job security is a fixture of the past. The combination of a fluid global economy and of the stock market's need for consistently high profitability will see nicely to that.

This book is written to honor those men and women who have been fired, and who dusted themselves off and got back into the ring, often with a dramatic reduction in status, frequently at a fraction of their previous wages.

It's also written in recognition of those people who have always worked hard for very little money. Twenty eight and a half million workers nationwide earn less than \$8 an hour. Only 37.6 million earn \$15 or over, according to figures provided by the Economic Policy Institute, and printed in *The New York Times* in November of 1999.

America is an economic juggernaut, and I don't suppose an economic juggernaut can ever be entirely fair or just. You have to break eggs to make a revolution. Do you also need to break eggs to make a profit? Sometimes. Fine, but we've got to remember that no major faith I've ever heard of associates blessedness with gross income.

The poor are poor, but they are not damned until we damn them. Which happens a lot. We live in an age in which some physicists think the photon may be a sentient being, and yet many of us assume that the clerks at Nobody Beats the Wiz are not sentient beings.

The woman behind the counter at customer service has trouble working the register – but remember, she probably took that job a week ago. Odds are good that she works

nights somewhere else and is helping to support her mother. The American Express Platinum Card may guarantee easy credit, but it doesn't necessarily make you a quick study. I bet you'd have trouble with that register too.

The heroism of the hourly worker (and no I don't think heroism is too strong a word) is most dramatically illustrated in the downsized.

I once saw a former IBMer – not the one in car sales – work Easter Sunday to repair a customer's broken computer, a good deed which, under the pay-plan of his employer, actually cost him money. But even those who simply survive with grace are demonstrating a quiet and entirely admirable species of heroism. They are toeing the line in a race they have already lost.

They're all around you, these workers on the comeback trail. The new old faces behind the counter often have moving stories. This book is an acknowledgement of their numbers and a celebration of their resilience, their energy, and their humor. I have no doubt that without these silent divisions, the whole glorious front would collapse.

Luke Chapter 13, Verse 30: And, behold, there are last who shall be first, and there are first who shall be last.

EPISTLE ON A LEAF and Other Poems

Mihai Ursachi

Translated from the Romanian
by Adam J. Sorkin *with* Georgiana Farnoaga, Ileana Orlich, and Doru Motz

Epistle on a Leaf

We shall live in the middle of a leaf, my love,
the green serenity in the middle of a leaf.
Lightning-swift our life will be, our awareness
of the all and the anything; the comforting
remembrance of those
who never were. We shall remember
a hill, a hill we loved so much,
the well filling from deep in its heart;
and the twilight through which,
flung helter-skelter about its skirt, the slum
appeared the neglected toy of an infant god . . .

What crazy words I used to speak, oh, I wanted
to be sure that we existed, that truly *we are*: that here,
here is a tree, or a pillar, and we're standing beside it, alive.
That this, in your hand, is the leaf
on which we were destined to live. On which we remember
we once lived in great peace,
serene with deep knowledge. No, we weren't mistaken,
we didn't tell lies: this is the hill, beside the well
is a tree, among its leaves
is a leaf. I tell you again,

surely we lived on this very leaf
where you are reading now, if it please you.

A Short Stroll to the Grove

Because of a fierce headache
we went for cold drinks to the grove
named, rather romantically, it can't be denied, Poetry.
Such a crowd I'd never seen there, not even for halvah
(which hasn't been known to exist
since ancient times, even prehistoric).
When our abulic band showed up, thirsty for lemonade,
I could see that they'd torn someone in tatters
which then they'd hung from the gilded iron spikes of the fence,
while others, probably Achaeans, kept screaming in Greek
something exciting, of which we could understand only the word "hymen"
and a few euphonic vowels before and after that word.
"Good," we yelled in chorus, cheek to cheek,
"we'll be satisfied with dry sesame seeds,"
while the tallest and skinniest among that multitude,
a guy I seemed to know by sight
or from some photograph, rambled on in Esperanto,
or Aramaic, something comprehensible in any case,
but we didn't have the courage to decipher it.
Instead we retorted with "The Declaration of the Rights of Man,"
to widespread hilarity. And this whole story,
meaningless from the start, lasted an epepean age,
though we have no idea how. Thus we grew old and we died
and never succeeded in signing our names
in the guest book.

Socratic Spring

This blizzard of spring utters
ecstatic sophisms. An orgy of petals, the spring's lovers
in white mourning, the apricot trees now groan, now exult,
under the severe idea of heaven. Hosanna,

a demon of rapine, of withdrawing far into the distance,
the fatalistic joy when everything comes spilling
out of the self, like milk filling milk pails: three huge butterflies,
bigger than cherubim, glide through the balsam-sweet air.

Boundless power, the universal howl, the sob of life. Among the spheres
a rumor, or a fever, steals abroad; ethereal
faces take shape in astral mud. "Never shall we forget
life's moment." So they greeted one another in the blossoming forest.

"Why not, Socrates, why not? . . ." Spring's
loony wisdom. Scorching heat waves have to follow,
never-ending rains, harsh ice. Without fear, those summoned
bid adieu to everything. Multitudinous
are the Plutonian proofs. "This call proves stronger than Fate itself."

There are valleys in the abyss, illuminated by dead waters; and your brothers,
those without being, in flocks and swarms, invoke long-forgotten hymns,
feeble, faint . . . Their voices, the forsaken—
never will they fade from your hearing. "Why not, Socrates, why not? . . ."

The Crown of Straw

A ball of clay launched in violence from a blind slingshot,
 this globe of pain hurtles far into chaos,
 bearing my love: What good,
 elaborate lute songs? What good,
 magniloquent twilight of violet hues?
 The voice on the face of the waters
 you don't hear, don't believe, don't speak about.

Behold my ancestors' patch of earth; here they plowed
 ten thousand years; here their gentle oxen drowned in clay
 at the foot of the skies. May they rest in peace,
 the gentle ones, may the eternally restless find their rest.
 Their field is the azure, stars their grain:
 but a crown of straw, a wreath of nonredemption, adorns my brow.

A restless plummeting into the unplumbed precipice
 of the sky . . . What good,
 the dizzy drunkenness of the forest in bloom? What good,
 the fiery madness of an impossible thought?
 Oh, won't these eyes ever open upon
 their salvation? Never
 will I cease to love the impossible.
 A crown of straw adorns my head.

With boundless love, the abyss
 swallows me, the abyss embraces
 this sphere, which is
 His tear.

The weeping on the face of the waters
 you don't hear, don't believe, don't speak about.

The History of the Great Clock and the Blind Man

A huge clockwork, in the wilderness of stones,
like an immense basilica-mosque. None
among you, travelers, has traversed that realm
known as "The Great Stone Clock." Some say its melancholy sound
can be heard absolutely everywhere on earth,
but it's much likelier for it never to be heard anywhere
(or, since we hear it continuously, habit makes us hear it not at all).
What seems strange to me is that the watchman, blind and poor,
always is counting something, using for this purpose
the small mummy bones of his hands. He counts in haste,
and sometimes his blind face, as parched as an old palimpsest,
appears to glow with hope and joy. Then he stares with his
empty eye sockets at the Great Clock.
Soon he is absorbed again in his wretched calculus,
and no one disturbs the great silence all around.

This, worthy travelers, is the history
of the Great Clock and the Blind Man,
Now I've told you, so I'll keep still.

New Song

Hey, hey, my pretty, the Mississippi flows to the Gulf of Mexico
but the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.
No new song seems possible on our planet,
so let's take our rucksack and shove off for the Sun.

Hey, hey, my pretty, the mighty Volga pours into the Caspian Sea
but the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.
Words of love will no longer do the trick in this world,
so let's take our rucksack and shove off for the stars.

Hey, hey, my pretty, the Yellow River rushes to the China Sea
but the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.
Birth-pain, life-torment, beggarly love,
the Sun of life—ten thousand bombs.

Hey, hey, my pretty, the ancient Nile empties into the Mediterranean
but the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.
Don't you hear crude oil glugging in clogged veins, *evohë Uranos!*
And the stars—corpuscles clotted in a cosmic heart attack.

Hey, hey, my pretty, the deep blue Amur is thawing
but the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.
This song isn't some happy-go-lucky sing-along,
today's the day you're going to leave me.

But the Bahlui creeps toward the Siret.

∴

"A Short Stroll to the Grove" and "New Song" were translated by Adam J. Sorkin. "The Crown of Straw" was translated by Adam J. Sorkin with Georgiana Farnoaga. "The History of the Great Clock and the Blind Man" was translated by Adam J. Sorkin with Ileana Orlich. "Socratic Spring" and "Epistle on a Leaf" were translated by Adam J. Sorkin with Doru Motz.

A LITTLE BROWN BIRD

Ann MacKinnon Kucera

I must have been already dizzy from the heat to have gone walking at noon on a cloudless midsummer day without a hat. If she had noticed my departure, Magdalena would have pressed a straw hat down on my head, but this was my own private escapade and I slid out unseen.

My husband spent much of his time tapping desultorily on his typewriter, closed away from the children, with a fine view of one of the harbors of Majorca beyond his shaded window and a rapidly emptying jug of wine beside him. My life, on the other hand, was one of frustration, of rushing heatedly about trying to make an American home without any refrigeration, fresh vegetables or running water, surrounded on all sides by kindly but incomprehensible fishermen with their boats, nets and quaintly dressed families. This day I left the children napping under the care of the strong-minded Magdalena, and slipped away for a quiet solitary walk.

All was a confusion of heat, soft powdery dust and blinding light. But I followed the hot road that wound beside the Mediterranean shore for a quarter mile or so until I felt it would be much wiser to return, pausing under every shady tree to cool off before plunging out into the unbearable sunshine again.

It was while resting beneath one over-arching tree that I became aware of a bird singing just over my head. It was an unfamiliar sound, not the usual series of repeated trills but a long sustained and varied song, repeated over and over after short silences.

The curious thing was its unusual beauty. I found myself on the verge of tears listening to it. The song seemed to be addressed directly to me, telling a story or carrying a message that I could not quite catch. I tried my utmost to memorize the notes so that I could recall the song later, to hear it again in my mind and then try to understand it. But I was unable to do so, because as soon as I had memorized the first few notes I forgot them in the strong feelings brought on by the rest of the melody.

When the bird tired of its branch and fluttered away through the hot sunlight to another tree, the combination of my emotion at the beauty of the song and frustration at being deprived of it were so violent that I began to sob. I croaked out such foolish things as "Wait for me!" and "Don't leave me!" as I ran blindly after the bird until I could stand under it once more in the shade of its new tree.

It did not seem at all put out by the fuss I was raising under its branch but continued to pour out its lovely song, while I, now too upset to even try to memorize the notes, only attempted to remain unobtrusive enough not to drive it away, stifling my sobs and restraining my breath, praying to it in murmurs not to leave me.

It flew to the next tree and waited for me to appear below before beginning its song anew. Why was it not afraid, or at least a little shy? It seemed to be teasing me by flying just out of reach, then lighting on a twig and whisking its tail while it sang a few repetitions of its song before darting again into the sunlight, to light in another tree where it watched to see if I would follow.

By now I was calling more openly to the bird, begging it to stay, whining and sniveling; my eyes were nearly blinded by tears. I felt that if it flew away and left me alone

that would be the end of any happiness or hope in my life. The thought of the dark ordinary world closing in on me was more than I could bear. I argued and scolded, but the bird continued on its way, coaxingly flicking its tail whenever I was too slow in catching up, and rewarding my efforts with another spell of divine song. My clumsy progress in the blazing heat was making me lag and the blurring tears made me stagger.

Now the bird was running out of trees to sing from. It flew across the unshaded road to where a low stone wall held back large spiny cacti, probably prickly pears, edging a nearly hidden cliff of jagged rock, falling steeply down to the sea. The bird lighted upon a tall cactus and sang a little as I knelt on the wall and looked frantically for a clear spot among the prickles where I could stand close to it and listen. But the grove was thick with threatening spines.

The bird left its cactus perch and ducked down over the edge of the cliff. If it had found some protruding branch below to sing from, the sound was drowned out in the roar of the waves smashing against the base of the cliff far below.

I was perfectly aware that following the bird would be the end of me, first by slashes from the cactus spines and then by a tumble down the cliff face to the sea, but I had seriously calculated the least painful spots to place my feet during a passage through the spines before the bird had foiled my plan by disappearing. Only then did I give up and face the bleakness of reality at that harsh line where it borders the heart's desire. I sat on the wall and cried like an abandoned child.

I staggered home dizzily, back to my shady house. When I returned to my senses I wondered what had happened. Had I gone mad in the hot sun and started fantasizing in a dream world? I also carefully considered the possibility that I had a strong death-wish which the bird had merely facilitated? Was I that unstable?

The shameful story remained locked in my breast for the next fourteen years, during which time I straightened out my life, bought some binoculars and become a bird watcher. At long last I confided my tale to a fellow birder, Dr. Elizabeth Boyd, then head of the Biology department at Mt. Holyoke College. She was not a fault-finding person and I was able to confess my aberrant state of mind now that so many years had passed.

"What did the bird look like?"

"Oh, like nothing at all; just a little brown bird."

"Then it had to have been a nightingale. For that is the exact description given by all those who have encountered one. I have never been fortunate enough myself, but it is well known that they affect their hearers in the same way you were."

Now that my alarming experience had been given a name, I suddenly remembered reading the famous naturalist John Burrough's account of hunting through the woods all night in the rain after hearing only a few notes of the nightingale's song, and being forbidden entry into an English inn the next morning on account of his disheveled condition. I had read that throughout Europe and the rest of its extensive range the little bird, which had the power to create joy and uncontrollable yearning, had been incorporated into local mythology and fairytales.

...a poor little kitchen maid who said, "Oh Heavens! The nightingale? I know it very well Every evening I am allowed to take broken meat to my poor sick mother..... when I am tired I rest awhile in the wood and then I hear the nightingale. Its song brings the tears into my eyes. I feel as if my mother were kissing me.

Hans Christian Anderson, "The Nightingale"

In addition to the feeling of having received a loving touch from the song, the characters in these stories are also aware of an overpowering desire to understand the bird's language and to keep the it nearby, by capture or coaxing.

A laborer lay listening to a Nightingale's song throughout the summer night. So pleased was he with it that the next night he set a trap and captured it. "Now that I have caught thee," he cried, "Thou shalt always sing to me."

Aesop, "The Laborer and the Nightingale"

The sweet nightingale began to sing its wonderful song with trills and high silvery notes. The merchant listened and listened to the song and said, "How I wish that I could understand the meaning of the different songs of all the birds. Ivan sat with his parents when the nightingale was singing in his cage. His song was so sad however, so very sad, that the merchant and his wife also became sad, and their son, their good Ivan, who listened very attentively, was even more affected, and the tears came running down his cheeks.

FOLK TALES FROM THE RUSSIAN. Rand McNally, 1903

Alles Schweiget, Nachtigallen
Lochen mit sussen Melodien
Thranen ins Auge, Schwermut ins Herz.

Out of the silence the sweet singing Nightingales
Draw tears to the eyes and melancholy to the heart.

Austrian Canon

Both Virgil and Oscar Wilde, with their heightened poetic sensitivity, must have thought that the nightingale herself must be unhappy to cause others to weep so in sympathy.

...but all night
Grieves she, and, sitting on a bough, runs o'er
Her wretched tale, and fills the wood with woe.
Virgil, "Orpheus"

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, wilder and wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.

Oscar Wilde, "The Nightingale"

There is little reported about the quality of the notes themselves. Burroughs heard only “a quick brilliant call or whistle.” If I remember correctly, Shakespeare heard, “Jug Jug.” Wordsworth reported, “They pierce and pierce; tumultuous harmony and fierce!” To Wilde it was, “like water bubbling from a silver jar.” To me the music was sweet; if it pierced, it was painless. Perhaps the listeners hear what they need to hear.

Though I cannot recall the sound or order of the notes I remember very well my joy and sorrow; the tears run down my cheeks as I write about them. And I still puzzle over the unanswered question: Was the nightingale’s song reality or the dream into which we all yearn to escape? Or was it the paradox of both at once?

No Nightmare
Kathryn Bernard

I wait in darkness for the passing of the hours
My shades drawn tight against the prowlers of the night
My closet locking in the bogeyman,
My bedroom door ajar to catch the light.

The stairs they creak, the floorboards groan,
Asleep? In bed yet? Even home?
I lie and, straining, hold my breath,
Not sure if sounds are sounds or phantoms of an earlier death.

Till unaware my lungs betray, expand, contract,
My hyper vigilance denied,
My breathing starts then slows into a semblance of
The peacefulness of sleep which waking life belies.

Till, eyes sewn shut, the dream – the dream again, I recognize:
A dome of darkness, ruddy shadows turning black,
And beating, thudding, something unseen terrifies,
Some awful truth bores in behind my back.

Am I alone there in the cavern of my heart,
Its shade unwarmed by the satanic glow
That reaches for the edges of this darkened space then dies,
Snuffed out by blackness as the shadows flow

And ebb, and grow – create? Conceal?
The bulging carapace that's black with blood
My life's blood filling, bloating, is it real?
Or am I still alone within my heart,

Safe, though petrified by dreams I yet may see?
(The hall door clicks; a darker shadow stands within.)
The monstrous bug digs in my heart voraciously,
No dream but gnawing at the substance of myself
Within, without, I know it well, once more consuming me.

A Conversation about Schocken Books
Part II

with SUSAN RALSTON
and the Editor of *Archipelago*

Since 1997, I have been asking notable publishers and editors, a bookseller, and a journalist who follows these topic about the book business and the remarkable, disturbing alteration we have seen in its structure. Generously, they have told me how they entered the book trade; spoken about writers they've published and declined to publish; described the (changing) class structure of their domain; talked straight about money, commerce, and corporate capitalism; described their way of practicing responsible publishing. They have taken us into the precarious business of selling books, and have traced the advent and threat/promise of electronic publishing. Without exception they have been serious readers, usually of more than one language. They have recognized that times have changed. They have observed with wary friendliness the generations coming up. They have spoken out of the old values and honorable traditions of book-publishing. They, and I, have wondered whether these can still exist in corporate publishing. Several eminent editors recently published books doubting it. It's been difficult not to agree.

I thought it was time to look closely at a single publishing company, one that had played a significant role in European and American Jewish – and non-Jewish – culture. I would follow its fortunes from the days of its cultivated founder, through his death and the sale of his company to a privately-owned corporation, to its being re-organized as a small sub-division of a gigantic media conglomerate. Its existence is full of twists and ironies, of displacement across continents, its founder's intention revered but re-interpreted in a new time. Its story is corporate but, also, is composed of the intersection of enlightened personalities and the works of great writers with the most awful events of the twentieth century. Following it, I would examine the play of high culture with corporate mind-sets and see how it worked.

These new conversations began in Volume 5, Number 2, and will appear in the next two issues of Archipelago, culminating this series that may serve as an opening into an institutional memory contrasting itself with the current corporate structure, reflecting on glories of its own, revealing what remains constant amid the flux. The people speaking here are strong-minded characters engaged with their historical circumstances. Out of that engagement have appeared, and continue to be published, a number of books that we can say, rightly, belong to literature.

-KM

Schocken Books: A Brief History of a Publishing Company

See also Part I, *Archipelago* Vol. 5, No. 2

Salman Schocken, a German Jewish magnate and philanthropist, established the Schocken Verlag in Berlin, in 1931. During the seven years his company existed – was allowed to exist – in Weimar, then Nazi, Germany, it published 225 titles of classic

Hebrew works important to the educated, assimilated Jews of its founder's class and generation. Owner of a chain of department stores, Schocken was a man of wealth and leisure who devoted himself to collecting fine art and literature. While re-investigating his Jewish roots – he was “greatly influenced” by the *TALES OF RABBI NACHMAN OF BRATZLAW*, translated by Martin Buber, whose friend he was – he became convinced that the great works of sacred and secular Hebrew writing should be translated into German and published for the sake of his fellow believers.

In 1934, Salman Schocken emigrated to Palestine, while Lambert Schneider, his managing editor, and Moritz Spitzer, editor-in-chief, remained in Berlin, operating the company by virtue of an active exchange of letters with him. In Palestine, Schocken established the Schocken Publishing House, Ltd., under the direction of his son Gerschom. Then, in 1940, Schocken and his family, except for that son, took ship for the United States, where he immediately joined the widening circle of brilliant German Jewish refugees adding their luster to American cultural and intellectual life. Five years later, enlisting the aid of Hannah Arendt and Nahum Glatzer as editors, he founded Schocken Books in New York.

Salman Schocken died in 1959. The firm continued under the direction of his son Theodore and son-in-law, Herzl Rome, until the younger Schocken also died, in 1975. The heirs managed to continue publishing for some time, until they, too, began to age. When the company's revenues began to decline, they let it be known that Schocken Books was for sale. André Schiffrin, managing director of Pantheon, was especially interested and in 1987, persuaded Random House, Inc., to buy Schocken Books and place it under his direction. Random House, Inc., which included the publishing houses Random House, Knopf, and Pantheon, was by then owned by Advance Publications, a privately-held corporation of the Newhouse family, which also owned Condé Nast, the magazine publishing company.

Conventional wisdom says that Schocken Books was in difficulty at least in part because of an unexpected success. In 1981, it brought out *WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE*, by Rabbi Howard Kushner. The book sold a huge number of copies. The result was what so often happens to small companies after a very big windfall: suddenly, the firm had more money than it knew how to spend wisely. (Something similar happened to Atheneum during its first year, according to Michael Bessie.¹) According to this version, Schocken Books began to pay larger advances to authors new to its list, which were not then earned back in sales, and the company began to slide.

At the time Random House acquired Schocken Books, the Newhouse family, as Advance Publications, was particularly concerned by the rate of return on their investment, which it considered inadequate.²

Random House, Inc., (or “Big Random,” the publishing imprint being “Little Random”) in 1989, when “the first waves of change swept over the place,” was organized as follows. The president of “big” Random House was Robert Bernstein. The directors of the various imprints reported directly and separately to him. (Robert Gottlieb, editor-in-chief of Knopf, had left for the *New Yorker* in early 1987, following the firing of William Shawn – *The New Yorker* is also owned by Advance Publications – and been replaced by Sonny Mehta, publisher of Pan, in London. At that time, Knopf, Pantheon, and “little” Random House were separate entities within “big” Random House.)

In 1989, S.I. Newhouse fired Robert Bernstein and brought in a new CEO, Alberto Vitale, from the Bertelsmann-owned Bantam Books, part of Bantam Doubleday Dell. “Alberto looked around, and he saw that Pantheon – Pantheon, mind you! – was one of the leaking holes as far as money was concerned. He made certain stipulations to André

which André didn't accept, and André was fired. And that inspired certain kinds of reorganization."³

During the early- to mid-'90s, Vitale reorganized "big" Random House. He neatly trisected the trade division. Having consisted of between eleven and sixteen imprints, it was now re-arranged into three groups: the Knopf Group, the Random Group, and the Crown Group. The Knopf Group came under the aegis of Sonny Mehta and included Alfred A. Knopf, Pantheon, Schocken, Vintage, and several smaller imprints. The editorial directors of Pantheon, Schocken, and Vintage would thus report to Sonny Mehta, president of the Knopf Group, rather than directly to the president of the corporation, Alberto Vitale. When S.I. Newhouse sold Random House, Inc., to Bertelsmann GmbH. in 1998, that structure was kept in place. (Later, Anchor Books and Everyman's Library, which had been part of Doubleday, also owned by Bertelsmann, were moved into the Knopf Group.) The fourth, separate division of Bertelsmann in the U.S. is the Bantam-Doubleday-Westside Group.

Thus is Random House, Inc., now organized.

Following André Schiffrin as editor-in-chief of Pantheon/Schocken was Fred Jordan, who remained in place until 1993, when Arthur Samuelson became editorial director of Schocken Books. Samuelson proposed an ambitious plan to refresh the backlist, commission new translations, and publicize Schocken books "in a kind of quasi-commercial mode." During that time, Dan Frank, formerly an editor at Viking, then at Pantheon, was named as his counterpart at Pantheon, and the two imprints worked separately. In 1999, Arthur Samuelson left Schocken and was replaced by the present co-directors, Altie Karper and Susan Ralston. Having come from inside the Knopf Group, these newest directors have (as they explain) carefully woven their operation back into the workings of Pantheon and Knopf, warding off functional isolation of their small imprint within the conglomerate.

In the first of these conversations devoted to the history and presence of Schocken Books, I spoke with Altie Karper, managing editor of Schocken Books and Pantheon. The second is with Susan Ralston, editorial director of Schocken and a senior editor at Alfred A. Knopf. We spoke twice in New York, in the editorial offices of Schocken Books – located between those of Pantheon and Knopf – in early May of this year. Susan Ralston's determination to keep Schocken alive and thriving within the corporate structure is evident; her analysis of that structure "from the bottom of the inverted pyramid," instructive. I was particularly curious to learn how she saw the founder's intentions as being relevant, or perhaps no longer so, to contemporary Jewish book buyers, and, equally, how her reading of them fit into the ethos of Bertelsmann.

Salman Schocken's intention; or, marketing Kafka

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I would like to continue talking about Schocken Books, about the intention of the founder, Salman Schocken, and how that intention is being carried out in the midst of structural changes in the book trade. Without dating these changes, which everyone recognizes but dates back to a different starting point, I will note that the publishing "industry" certainly is not now what it was five years ago, and not what it was ten years ago.

SUSAN RALSTON: Correct.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Schocken is in a special kind of circumstance, because what Salman Schocken endured, took his publishing company through, was much more serious and dire than corporate changes, wouldn't you say?

SUSAN RALSTON: You're referring to his flight from Germany.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes indeed.

SUSAN RALSTON: That certainly was more dire. It was a matter of life and death.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But he was able to establish three publishing companies, in fact: one in Berlin, one in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and then in New York. And he was able to do that and keep it going for some time. Amid this, a small but pertinent instance of what caught my attention: when Max Brod offered Schocken world rights to the work of Kafka, the then editor-in-chief didn't want to take them because he didn't think Kafka was "marketable."⁴

SUSAN RALSTON: But of course many people have made many errors in publishing. There's nothing like picking up *P[ublishers] W[eekly]* and seeing a rave for a book you turned down, to take you down a peg.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Imagine how it was then to consider publishing Kafka! That sort of question always interests me. But then another editor persuaded him that these works by Kafka were relevant to what Schocken Verlag was trying to publish, because of the quality of Kafka's mind and its relationship to the existing brilliance and importance of secular Jewish culture in Germany and the German-speaking lands. Surely, these are editorial decisions that occur all the time. That Schocken Verlag was capitalized by Salman Schocken, and that, nonetheless, this decision had to be made is worth examining. I wonder now if you can tell me how you see Schocken's intentions being carried forward?

SUSAN RALSTON: Before I took on this assignment I had some conversations with Sonny [Mehta, president and editor-in-chief of the Knopf Publishing Group] about my sense of what I would and could do. For example, Schocken has published numerous books on the Kabbalah, but I do not connect to that spiritual practice, that side of things. I never read those books, never buy those books, either as a consumer or as an editor, and I'm really not qualified to publish them. Nonetheless, it's a topic that is not limited even to Jewish readers; at the moment, there is tremendous interest in the Kabbalah in our culture. Fortunately for me and for Schocken, Altie knows a lot more about it than I do! That's only one of the ways that she and I mesh into a good team for the imprint.

There are things that come out of my particular experience as an editor that I felt I could bring to Schocken, that Schocken needed, and that would fit into the corporate structure we have now. I have twenty years worth of expertise in publishing books of cultural and social history, illustrated books, and extremely complicated multi-author special projects. And that's expertise that Schocken did need.

In the area of social history, my feeling is that there is a readership beyond the exclusively Jewish market; that people – mostly Jews, but others as well – are interested in the dynamics within the Jewish community, the relationship between Jews and the non-Jewish community, between the religious Jews and the secular ones, between U.S. Jewry and Israel, between the religious and secular Jews in Israel – all of these issues. Also, the contemporary issues of religious continuity, family life, intermarriage, and identity affect, or afflict the Jews, particularly – but they do affect other populations, too, as we all melt into the pot.

So, I felt that there were subject areas that I had dealt with before, though not in a specifically Jewish context, that I could now address in the more specific context, but also

that I could take care that Schocken not be lost as a little, parochial entity in this big company.

That was one side of it. Another side was that, having done many books at Knopf that were a little bit out of the mainstream, I knew about special marketing. If you look, you will find that the Jewish market is huge. I mean huge. Jews are people who buy books. They buy them for gifts, and they buy them for themselves. We do have, here at Random House, a tremendous sensitivity to that market. Frankly, there have been years when there were more “Jewish books” coming out of Knopf than out of Schocken. If you look at some of the major books of the last few years, there was Nathan Englander’s volume of stories, *FOR THE RELIEF OF UNBEARABLE URGES*, and Nomi Eve’s novel, *THE FAMILY ORCHARD*, Leon Wieseltier’s *KADDISH*, Benny Morris’s *RIGHTEOUS VICTIMS*, a book I edited on the Arab-Jewish conflict; there is always a great deal of material coming out of Knopf and Random House, and certainly out of Crown, on these subjects. So, within the corporate setting, a person who’s specializing in books of Jewish interest is not as isolated as you might think.

So, corporately we have a strong interest in serving that market. But the next question is, if you’re going to publish a list that is in any way limited in its potential readership, how do you function?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What does that mean exactly, limited in its potential readership?

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, that’s the big question. Everything’s limited. First fiction is limited, poetry is limited, etc., so, to say that books of Jewish interest are limited...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: ... is like saying they are limited to readers!

SUSAN RALSTON: There was one other area I discussed with Sonny: fiction. It’s been quite a while since there was any substantial fiction, except [Aharon] Appelfeld, from Schocken.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Though there were the novels by [S.Y.] Agnon.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes, and we tried to do the Yiddish classics; they didn’t sell very well. The first new book we published after I came on board, is the novel *THE FUNERAL PARTY*, by Ludmila Ulitskaya.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It has gotten beautiful reviews, and looks very interesting, I think. I began reading it on my way here.

SUSAN RALSTON: It’s really a good book; but here is a case in point. This is the first appearance in this country of an author who is quite well known in Russia and in Europe. In America, the book got sensational reviews, which contributed to an additional sale of maybe 150 copies, period. This is such a hard way to make a living! And it had nothing to do with the fact that the book came from Schocken. It’s a “first fiction,” that other limitation on the market. And it’s hard for anybody, in any imprint, to make that category sell well.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It wasn’t a book I would have thought of as first fiction.

SUSAN RALSTON: No, because she has been published before—but this was her debut in English, so it qualifies.

You asked about living within the Bertelsmann structure. When the former editors left, there was a lot of talk in *The Forward* and other Jewish papers about how this is the end of Schocken, it’s going to be closed down, will “those Germans” close it down, you know what I mean.... And the fact was, it never ever occurred to them to close it down. Bertelsmann takes a great deal of pride in Schocken, its accomplishments, its rich history. And it’s profitable! It has a great backlist and a good bottom line. It was a matter of

replacing the editorial director, who left the company; and I think I was a good logical choice, not least because I already knew my way around the company.

To come into Random House from the outside, you need six months just to figure out who's who, what's what, and how to get things done. It's a very complicated company. Schocken is an imprint within the Knopf Group, reporting to Sonny Mehta. We have very close ties with Pantheon, because we're not big enough to need our own support staff, as Altie has told you. It works smoothly.

I faced a huge rush of submissions in the beginning. It seemed as though every agent in New York had reached into the file and taken out all the old Jewish projects and sent them over. But I wasn't fresh out of the box myself, so I don't think I made too many errors there. We have the same constraints on us for acquisitions as the other imprints, i.e., the P&L [profit and loss statement] has to work, and not be, let's say, manipulated, massaged. As with anybody else in the Group, nobody cuts us any slack.

The state of Jewish publishing: "Judaica" and "books of Jewish Interest"

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You're an experienced editor. Would you talk about how you see your duties, or perhaps outlook, in this "specifically Jewish context," as you put it?

SUSAN RALSTON: The main issues, I feel, are these. One is the question about publishing what I call "Judaica," as opposed to the more general term, "books of Jewish interest." It's not only my intellectual differences with, or ignorance of, that more narrowly religious material, it's also about whether the [bookselling] reps can sell it. I've worked at this place for twenty years. I know there are books that don't get much attention during that sales call, when they have two minutes for each book on the list, and maybe, if they do yours in thirty seconds, they have three-and-a-half minutes for something with more potential. I don't want to invest our money, time, emotions in projects that our reps can't be completely behind, and that the booksellers are not going to respond to.

The Jewish publishing industry is healthy, actually. Between Jason Aronson, the Jewish Publication Society, Jewish Lights, ArtScroll, and all the other small, independent publishers, Judaica publishing is going forward. I feel that, even though I'm not furthering that line, I'm not doing anything to hurt it by concentrating on my strengths.

Then there is the Holocaust material – very difficult, because, emotionally, it's overwhelming. It keeps coming, as well it should; and yet we have to be very, very careful about what we publish. We got badly burned by the FRAGMENTS controversy.⁵ The waters are going to close over that when the report [THE WILKOMIRSKI AFFAIR: A STUDY IN BIOGRAPHICAL TRUTH, by Stefan Maechler] is published.

I just saw a manuscript the other day that was a "typical" Holocaust memoir, extremely well written, by a woman who does not impose what she knows as an adult on what she perceived as a ten- or twelve-year old in Poland. It's brief; it's brisk; it kills you. Can we publish it? We ask that question every day.

I'm very grateful for the World Jewish Congress program, which I'm sure you know about.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Will you describe it, please?

SUSAN RALSTON: Elie Wiesel, who is our most distinguished living author here at Schocken, and the World Jewish Congress put together a program, with great financial support from Bertelsmann by the way, called the Holocaust Survivors Memoirs Project.

They hired an editor. People can send their memoir to him and they will be given advice about publication.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: An editor.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes, well. I don't know how he's doing it; I bet he's a Tylenol addict by now. – He suggests whether it could be preserved in an online archive, in an e-book, or go to a university press, and so on. This means that there is a clearing-house of sorts; writers are not totally dependent on the trade publishers; I'm not just writing back to somebody saying, "I'm sorry that you reached in and ripped your guts out, and I can't publish your book." That makes my job a little easier; but not much. I still feel a very strong moral obligation to the writers, to read all these manuscripts when they come in.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, there is a responsibility to them.

SUSAN RALSTON: I sometimes wonder if I'm a becoming a kind of masochist; but, nonetheless, the manuscripts come, and I read.

So, that was a big issue. Anybody publishing books of Jewish interest during the past two decades, when the survivors have finally begun to talk and to write, has had to make numerous decisions about publishing Holocaust memoirs—which by now are actually a saturated market.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that a fact?

SUSAN RALSTON: That's the received wisdom: that it's a saturated market, that people don't go out and buy Holocaust memoirs. Is it true? I don't know. They are still being published, particularly by university presses with endowments for that purpose. Are people buying them? Who are these people who buy them? I don't know. Anybody who has the kind of bent or personality to buy Holocaust memoirs after they've read four, and have had a real taste of how horrible people are to people, I don't know if they can ... If they get hardened to it, then I don't ever want to meet them; but I think most people don't get hardened to it. They get drained.

There are other questions that influence these decisions. What is the responsibility of an imprint with the name of Schocken, in 2001? Who are its readers and what do they want? And what is the larger responsibility of our generation to the past?

The new Schocken Bible

KATHERINE McNAMARA: One undertaking here at Schocken that has interested me is your commission of a new translation of the Old Testament.

SUSAN RALSTON: The Everett Fox translation.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I grew up knowing the King James or Authorized version, and we had the Douai version; but in English, of the Old Testament is there no standard translation for Jews to read?

SUSAN RALSTON: The standard translation of the Hebrew Bible, the name Jews prefer to "Old Testament," is the Jewish Publication Society's translation. It's the one that's most used; so I suppose you would call that the standard. Other people have translated certain books, such as Robert Alter, who translated Genesis. Arthur Samuelson decided to go with Everett Fox.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, of course, I beg your pardon. – It's a curious question, isn't it, why to make a new translation? The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz made a new version, not I think of the whole Bible, but at least parts of the New Testament, that became, then, the Bible Poles now use. We have the Jerusalem Bible, a beautiful translation. As well, a great deal of re-translation is being done now in the classics of literature.

SUSAN RALSTON: Much of this translation initiative has to do with correction. Think about the argument of whether it's the "Red" Sea or the "Reed" Sea: people are each other's throats over this one. But a lot of it has to do with archaeology, and scholarship, and feminist agendas, and so on – such as, are we going to call God "He"? Those are issues that come in the liturgy, as well. There is always room for scholarship. And Everett Fox has his own agenda. There are many words in his translation that are not synonyms, they're the literal renderings.

I'm just looking in his book for something, one of the strange words he uses. Here: "When they measured by the omer, no surplus had the one-more, and the one-less had no shortage. Each-man had gleaned according to what he could eat." What he was doing here is taking these compound words in Hebrew and, where other people give synonyms, he's given you the literal, compound word. That's his program, then.

It's important for translations to be used in the synagogue. We would never undertake to publish Everett Fox's translation alongside the Hebrew. However, Jossey-Bass, which is part of John Wiley, is doing that. They've licensed the translation, with Michael Lerner's commentary, and they've licensed the JPS Hebrew version. They're going to be selling the volume in the "synagogue market." I think people will always want to translate the Bible for their own day.

Schocken paperbacks

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you "paperback" your own books?

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes. Let me just go back a step. One of the things that Schocken used to do was to paperback other publishers' books. I thought I was going to continue doing it. But the fact is, now we're in the computer age, firmly, and the tiniest little bookstore on Main Street is also in the computer age. They know exactly how many copies they sold in hardcover. You are really up against it if you go to them with a book that they didn't sell well, or that they returned in great numbers.

The only books that I get offered from outside Random House, now that everybody is conglomerated, are books that nobody in one of the conglomerates wants. Why would Viking offer me a book when they have Penguin? Because Penguin doesn't want it, you see. The only books Knopf and Pantheon – offer outside are the books that Vintage or Anchor don't want to bring out in soft cover. Schocken has always had the practice of paperbacking its own books. That's why it has maintained bottom-line health in backlist. And we'll continue to do that.

For example, next summer, we're bringing back a novel by Elie Wiesel called *THE OATH*, which has long been out of print. We're committed to having all of his work in print. We're bringing back another book called *IN THIS DARK HOUSE*, by Louise Kehoe, published by us in 1995 or so, and then by Penguin in paperback. It never got what it should have achieved in the way of sales. We think enough time has gone by. It's a very strong memoir, and our reps are behind it. But, by and large, if you looked at my publication schedule, you'd see that the hardcover titles on it this year will appear again in paperback in a year or year-and-a-half.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It's good, I think, to know publishers' ways of thinking. I think back once more to my wonderment at the idea that Kafka was not "marketable."

SUSAN RALSTON: We've all read reviews in *PW* of books that we turned down, and we think, "What editor bought this?" That's what makes it a horse race, I guess.

Schocken Books, social theory, and the college market

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I have an article here, printed in 1971, by Theodore Schocken, called “Schocken Books: Twenty-five Years of Judaica Publishing in America.” He writes about the initial program of the New York house, which “took its cue from the activities of the Berlin firm” – that is, translations of scholarly volumes, as before, but also, “pictorial volumes,” books by contemporary writers, translations of modern Israeli fiction, and also, the Schocken Library, the paperback list. Except for the translations of Kafka, he goes on, the house devoted itself solely to publishing “the Jewish book.” “This policy imposed serious economic limitations,” he admits.

He goes on to say, “And while the books were warmly received by the Jewish community and widely and favorably reviewed by both the general and Jewish press, sales remained small, and the marketing of the books turned out to be a costly task. Thus, after the first four highly active years in which about 60 books were issued, the firm decided to cut back its work drastically during the 1950s.” And then Salman Schocken died in 1959. It sounds, then, as though they published twenty, or fewer, books each year. Do you know anything about that time?

SUSAN RALSTON: No, I don’t. Over there is a fiftieth-anniversary poster that lists all the authors, and a look at the backlist catalog gives you an indication of what had been published that survived.

When I came to Schocken, some friends of mine who had been in college in the ‘70s, said, “Oh, Schocken. I still have all my Schocken books on my bookshelf.” And those friends weren’t Jewish. The editors back then had a great bent toward social history, political philosophy, labor, and so on.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yesterday, I spent two hours in the Pantheon/Schocken library. It was a bit like being back in graduate school, without the dismay of it. I saw so many old friends on the bookshelf. Theodore Schocken writes a lovely passage about why they published those kinds of books: “A major part of the program is played by the Jewish paperback.” I thought this quite moving: “The ambition to put Jewish books of high intellectual caliber into the hands of the young Jewish reader, which played such an important part in our traditional program, is being largely fulfilled through the Schocken paperbacks. The young American Jew arriving for the first time on the college campus finds the Schocken paperbacks in his university bookstore and is assigned by professors in a variety of courses – sociology, history, literature, comparative religion. Thus convinced that they have general acceptance, he often ‘discovers’ the Jewish books, which in the past his parents or his rabbi had tried in vain to interest him in.”

SUSAN RALSTON: Force on him.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: “Indeed, some of the Schocken paperbacks are among the most popular college ‘adoption’ titles. These include Roth’s *A HISTORY OF THE JEWS*, Zborowsky & Hertzog’s *LIFE IS WITH PEOPLE*, Scholem’s *MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISHMYSTICISM*, Bernard Baumberger’s *THE STORY OF JUDAISM*, Sartre’s *ANTI-SEMITE AND THE JEW*, and Spiro’s *KIBBUTZ*.” And then: “Schocken paperbacks are issued in a uniform format of pleasing design” – with that Schocken “S” – “and great attention is paid to colorful, tasteful covers. Ben Shahn, Marc Chagall, Leonard Baskin and Bernard Reder have contributed illustrations for Jewish titles.”

I came of age among such books; and many other like me, as well.

SUSAN RALSTON: The more things change, the more they remain the same.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I was thinking about that in terms of your ruminations, not so much on Judaica, but on what the intelligent, educated Jewish reader wants now.

Because it does seem in a way more like the same, except, well, what also struck me – it certainly struck me when I was in graduate school in the very late '60s, early '70s – is the left-leaning tenor of the list.

SUSAN RALSTON: That is what I meant when I said political philosophy, labor studies, etc.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: We find ourselves living in a reactionary time now, I would say. Is it possible to think in terms of political philosophy or leftist issues? Are there leftist issues remaining?

SUSAN RALSTON: I don't know why you're asking me that. I ought to go away and think for an hour! I certainly think there is a liberal or left constituency, though it's unorganized and in disarray, and it's now in opposition. Probably, after sitting on their duffs for eight years thinking the world was going to go their way, many people in that constituency are going to be re-energized. We already see it with the environmental movement. But this is a personal observation. It has nothing to do with what I'm publishing, because that kind of project isn't even coming near us these days, and we're not going out and looking for it.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: You needn't answer, of course, although I find it worth asking, given the context of this discussion.

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, my feeling is that the world is infinitely more complicated than it was when the left elaborated its principles. Communism proved to be a wrong answer. Socialism proved to be an unworkable system. Capitalism came to rule the world. Thoughtful people, today, believe that it behooves them to figure out a way to achieve a measure of social justice in a capitalist world, a world that is overrun by rampant material self-indulgence. Good luck. That's going to be very difficult, especially without the government willing to move forward these very big issues.

But this is a digression, and the question that you asked was a good one, based on what you read to me about the college youth. Academic marketing is tremendously important to us and, in fact, to anyone in Random House Inc., who publishes an intellectually demanding or challenging book – and who publishes a paperback.

It's always been part of the Schocken program to do our own paperbacking. When I negotiate for a new book, I negotiate with an author/agent who knows that, when he comes to Schocken, this is where he's also going to be published in paperback. It's a very important part of our profit line. Of the titles that you read to me, a number are still at the top of our academic marketing sales histories, Gershom Scholem's books, for instance.

So yes, paperback academic adoptions are still very important. A young Jewish person who hasn't had much exposure, or has resisted exposure, to Jewish books discovers them in the college bookstore—that's a lovely dream. I hope it was true for Mr. Schocken. It would be nice if it were true for me. But I have no empirical evidence that that's the case. The evidence that we do have is that there is a burgeoning interest in Jewish studies. Every little campus in the most remote town in America has a Jewish studies program. Many have been endowed by Jewish alumni, and on a lot of campuses you'll find many non-Jewish students who want to study Biblical history in that context. And so, the possibilities of where we can sell our books have expanded tremendously with the expansion of attention to Jewish matters on college campuses.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: If you think of your readership as generally Jewish – and also non-Jewish, of course – you do know that you have a highly educated, alert, intelligent readership. I'm not sure that assumption is always made elsewhere in publishing. You're talking about academic marketing: do you think that there's a real distinction, or do you think that there is a crossover from, or to, the general readership?

SUSAN RALSTON: Sometimes, but not as often as before, we hope that a title will make money back for us as an academic-adoption book. It's good when it does; but you can't buy a book and predicate it on that, because that's not exclusively the kind of publisher we are. We are a front-list hardcover publisher, and then we paperback our books and hope that they have a continued life. I mean, by selling our titles to, having them adopted by, professors.

What we cannot do, here, is publish academic work — monographs and dissertations. That has to go to a university press. We cannot afford them. And the whole publicity angle that is so important to publishing now is very hard for us to break into. When a book is review-driven but not actively promoted or advertised, that way lies disappointment. I have had Knopf books that were on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, when they still had reviews on the cover. What we would see was a sales spike of, maybe, seventeen copies. These were positive reviews, but people read them and felt that they knew enough about the book, they weren't motivated to buy.

We published that little novel I gave you, *THE FUNERAL PARTY*, and the reviews were spectacular. Our net sale in hardcover was something less than 7,000 copies. You would think that people would be running out to buy it: it wasn't even an expensive book. No. The reviews were great, and we can use the quotes for the paperback edition and her next book, but reviews have much less effect than they used to; even *The New York Times Book Review* is much less influential than one might hope. Review organs around the country, as you know, are closing down or consolidating or shrinking. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Boston Globe*, two important newspapers, have either stopped reviewing books, or are going to have fewer reviews and more interviews with or stories about the authors. Many of us who work in publishing can't quite figure out how that's going to help us; why people would buy the book because they read that the author had a dysfunctional childhood, instead of reading a review of the book. What motivates the buyer?

Return on investment and the economics of conglomerate publishing

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Let me go back a ways, please. You said that the Newhouses, the former owners of the Random House company, were concerned about rate of return on their investment.

SUSAN RALSTON: I would think so.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What did they want, and what were they getting?

SUSAN RALSTON: The business was really not good in the late '80s. I'm not privy to their numbers, but if you were here then, you would hear people saying, "Oh this is what you think the bottom line will be? Well, that's not good enough any more." Tightening up of budgets, etc., was happening around that time.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I remember when Lee [Goerner, late publisher of the defunct imprint Atheneum] came home one day and said he'd heard that editors at Random in England had been told that they had to show a rate of return of fifteen percent.

SUSAN RALSTON: Told by whom?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I had the sense that every book they published was expected to earn that. I'm not certain of this, now, or who said it. It was one of those things he heard, and he didn't tell me the source or extent of it. He was disturbed, though, if not appalled by the false economics of it.

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, we were told by Bertelsmann, when they bought the company in 1998, that they expected a fifteen percent ROI. That's an extraordinarily high rate of return on investments for book publishing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: On every book?

SUSAN RALSTON: Overall.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: They obviously were moving that way, publishing companies, I mean, as they were becoming conglomerates, in the late '80s and even in the early '90s. But what I am always told is that publishing is countercyclical, and the rate of return on investment is never high.

SUSAN RALSTON: Exactly. The rate of returns – the books coming back – is high, but the rate of return is not.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Part of the reason the high rate of return is demanded, we are told, is because they have such a huge debt structure.

SUSAN RALSTON: I'm not qualified to comment on that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: In any case, what we see now are all of these things that don't have to do, per se, with what publishing was when there were houses, back in the golden years, the good old days...

SUSAN RALSTON: ...when everybody was a gentleman who had a private income and suede elbow patches, and did it for love, and so forth, but as a business...

KATHERINE McNAMARA: ...although they always expected to make money, of course, as it's also always said.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes. They weren't crazy, after all. Before I was in publishing I was in the arts. When I came to publishing, I met somebody I had known in my previous career. He said, "You know, when I worked in the arts I thought publishing was a business, and now that I'm in publishing, I see that it's an art." In terms of what you make on your money, he meant. But I feel we used to have a stronger sense in publishing that there were books that we weren't going to make any money on, but that we should publish because we should publish them. It had to do with prestige. It could happen in relation to any subject, that this was a book that would add luster to your name. Frankly, I did a lot of those books. They were *succès d'estime*, not *de commerce*. I don't see much of that any more. What I do still see is the willingness to nurture young writers and bring them along through four or five books.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That many?

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, three or four: hoping that they'll break out. The break-out expectation is, I think, lower than it used to be.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: That means what: "break out"? That they'll sell more copies?

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, that they are going to have a book that's really going to go to a higher level of sales than they've ever enjoyed before; that isn't going to have heavy returns; that will get not just respectful reviews, but the kind of reviews that send people into stores to buy a substantial number of copies. Usually, it's quite dramatic. You'll have a writer like Kazuo Ishiguro, let's say, who wrote a couple of books that, maybe, sold 7,500 copies; 12,000 in paperbacks. Then Sonny [Mehta] got hold of him, with *REMAINS OF THE DAY*, and bingo! To the moon! And other writers: Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, a number of English writers, particularly novelists, whom Sonny brought to Knopf, who have made great leaps. Or there is Carl Hiaasen, to take another example, who is not English. But with skillful marketing, brilliant marketing, they have achieved another plateau, another level of sales. Everybody wants that. I think there is still willingness to nurture the talent,

until they come along with that book that elevates them. Then, of course, you have to deal with expectations the next time around; but that's the game.

In terms of Schocken, to sum up: the spiritual books are not particularly interesting to me. Books dealing with historical and contemporary issues are of interest. The issues I'd like to deal with I think Schocken can deal with, without anyone saying that we've abandoned our past. And I'm completely comfortable with being part of this corporation and being owned by Bertelsmann. I don't feel, in any way, censored. The person I report to is Sonny Mehta. If we disagree it will be about a book's potential, not its contents. We're all very cautious now; we all want to be very, very careful in this market.

The Jewish communities and the costs of publishing books

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What is the nature of the market, or the readership, you depend on?

SUSAN RALSTON: One of the complications of publishing books of Jewish interest is that there are three masses within the Jewish community. One of them is the ultra-Orthodox and the religious-right: these people are antique, let's say, in their attitudes. They think that these books are full of the devil. They don't buy these books.

And then, at the other end, are the entirely assimilated people who are marrying out of the faith, raising their children with no Jewish education or identity. They, too, are not interested; they'd rather read what the American mainstream is reading.

Then, there is this great mass in the middle, which in itself is completely diversified. It's out there. We do have ways of reaching it. The annual Jewish book fairs all over the country are a powerful weapon for us. The rabbi network is powerful. The Jewish press is bubbling all over the place, it's noisy and it's busy. That is where the readership is, in the middle.

The question that you brought up at the very beginning, though, is really a key one. I see this as one of the great problems of Schocken at this moment. On the one hand, we know that the engine of profit is the backlist. The Schocken books that were published years ago have often been repackaged and reissued and recovered, but, nonetheless, they are standards. And there are more recent books that have quickly become standards on the campus. We know that's a fact. Therefore, what we should be doing, logically, is publishing more books that are going to have a long life of that kind in paperback. Which means, for one thing, predicting what is going to be wanted.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Is that possible?

SUSAN RALSTON: Predicting? I don't think so. Our academic marketing people go to all the scholarly conferences, and sometimes they come back and say to us, "You know, I'm hearing a lot about X," and you get the feeling that that's where intellectual interest is tending, but you can't really predict in a such way as to say, "If I publish this book, it will have that life."

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Branding hasn't touched you yet. (*laughter*)

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, people won't take it just because it's a Schocken book. It has to be relevant. I don't think branding has touched any imprint in the world, at all.

No. The question is: if, logically, we should be trying to refresh that stream, that desire should have a great influence on what we acquire for the front list. But the requirements we face are quite different. Because, for a front-list book, a hardcover trade book, you have to look first, obviously, at merit. But nowadays we also have to remind ourselves that the number of independent bookstores continues to shrink. There are a few little pinpoints of light on the horizon, but, by and large, the news is not great. Getting the

support of the chains for a book like this is almost impossible. Getting a book put on the chains' automatic reordering list is not easy. Books that have been in print for thirty years and are still continuing to sell, particularly in college towns, will be in the Barnes & Noble system. As soon as they're sold out, they'll be reordered; nobody even has to think about them. Well, how many books do you think are at that level?

So, we have to think about publishing a book that's going to get reviewed; that can be publicized; that can fit into certain kinds of promotional programs, Father's Day or Jewish holidays; whose author is marketable; and for which there is a general audience. It's possible to publish small and to publish profitably, if you do it right. If you don't waste money on redoing the jacket twenty times, if you don't pay the author a whole lot, if you print as many as you can sell, not 50,000 copies, you can have a success on a small scale.

But within the context of a commercial publishing house it becomes much, much harder, mainly because the costs of belonging to that corporation, that are assigned to every book, are tremendous. A person sitting in Vermont running a small Jewish publishing house with a commission sales force and personal ties all over the place is going to be able to operate closer to "on a shoestring". In fact, there are numerous Jewish publishers that are not at the bottom of an inverted corporate pyramid, with the Knopf Group, the trade division, Random House, Bertelsmann, on top of them. They can publish into a niche market far more effectively than we can. We, no matter how smart we are in terms of structuring the deal for a book, cannot operate on a shoestring. Because the same percentage of overhead costs are allocated from the sales of a 5,000-copy book as from a 100,000-copy book. But with a 5,000-copy book, you also have the problem of making people see it and know it's there.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: It has to be on the book-buyers' radar if people are going to see it.

SUSAN RALSTON: Exactly. So, the idea that you can publish a book that is actually not going to make any money until it's in paperback is a very hard notion to put over, with the fiscal accounting being as close as it can be, and with so much being expensed in the first year of the book's development. It's difficult to work out a formula like that. At the same time, we may fall into the trap of publishing books that only fit into one end in the marketplace. I think it's a challenge to do something else.

About this book that you see by Martin Gilbert, *THE JEWS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*, I'm thinking front-list here. I want something that is of a quality that later we can put it into paperback. But I am not thinking of paperback in order to get it onto college campuses. That is hugely helpful to Schocken, but I would not be able to publish something that I could get on a front table in Barnes & Noble, if its sure fate in life were only to become a supplement to a textbook. I have to reach the trade audience first. We did not have a big, illustrated gift book, which can be bread and butter, not just for the first year, but going on. And, in fact, a book like this, after two years, can come out in paperback. It's slightly oversized for a paperback, but there will be people who will want to wait for the lower price.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: This is the one that will be in people's houses, in their libraries, and they are going to give them, perhaps as gifts, but as serious gifts.

SUSAN RALSTON: And professors will adopt Martin Gilbert's other books of history of the twentieth century.

We also have a number of books coming dealing with subjects such as the great Jewish comedians of the '50s and '60s. Altie talked about that, as well as the book she's acquired on Chabad, the Lubavitch missionaries. These are books that are going to be written by lay people who are knowledgeable, who have journalistic ability and good

writing skills, and they will be of general interest, we think. And they are books that, when people see them on the table at a Jewish book fair, are going to be a little lighter in feel than our books in the past. I don't mean physically lighter, of course! Nor that we're launching a humor line or a fluff line, or anything like that, but that we want our books to appeal to people who want to read about their history.

However, the last thing I would say about this is that we have not by any means turned our back on serious publishing. It's simply that we're not a company publishing books primarily meant for, or initially meant for, the course-adoption market. But a book that we think will maybe break even in hardcover, but will really work in the college market: that would be wonderful.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And so, in effect, you're not saying that you're not going to be publishing books in social thought, for example.

SUSAN RALSTON: To the contrary.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But the definition of social thought has now become larger and more complex: that is what you seem to be saying.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes. We have a major project scheduled for Fall 2002 about the cultures of the Jews, in three volumes. It's called *CULTURES OF THE JEWS: From the Bible to Contemporary Israel and America*. It is written by twenty-two academics who are based either in Israel, America, or France. Each is an expert in a particular time and place. They were each asked to take a cultural artifact--an image, a story, a letter--and extrapolate from that what the culture of the Jewish community was like in that place and time, how it interacted with the larger culture, and what they took from each other. It begins with two essays on the Bible. One is by a literary critic who talks about the evolution of the concept of the nation in the Hebrew Bible, as the text goes through that early history and shapes the myths. The other is by a scholar who places the Israelites in the context of West Semitic and Caananite culture: where they lived, and the borrowings from each other that turn up in the Bible, which people gloss over now because we don't want to admit them.

The essays then go through Antiquity: the Greek period, the Roman period, the Byzantine period; Arabia at the time that the Moslem religion was founded; Arabia in its highest period of culture of the twelfth century; the beginnings of the Ashkenazim in Germany and France in medieval times; the culture of the Jews in pre-Catholic Iberia; the culture of the Sephardim who went to Amsterdam and London when they got kicked out of Iberia; the culture of those who went to North Africa. There is an essay on folk culture in Israel and how it is drawn from all the different groups that have come in. There is an essay on amulets and childbirth magic over about four centuries. There's one on the Jews of the Italian Renaissance and their adoption of aspects of that very visual culture, and so on. These are very specific eras and communities, many of them in no contact with other communities anywhere else, and each of them slightly different, and each of them sharing certain things. This is going to be a very important publication.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Oh yes, that's quite remarkable.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes, it's a remarkable project. We expect it to be pretty big in the trade – but we also expect it to become a major college work. The three volumes are Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era, structure along the lines and breaking points of Jewish history courses. This kind of project, which we feel is going to become a benchmark the way Cecil Roth or Zborowski and Hertzberg were for their era, is vital to us. All these scholars are engaged in an intensive study of Jewish culture and history, and of course theological scholars are also very active and still exploring. The world of Jewish scholarship is vast. A number of these authors have indicated that would like to talk to me about other projects that they have in mind. And as I have gotten to know them, and seen

books that they have published elsewhere, usually with university presses, I've thought, "Well, here's somebody that might very well write at greater length for Schocken on some aspect of his subject." So, it goes on, and it will come back.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I have caught a sense of fizz and ferment in what you've just described.

SUSAN RALSTON: In that world.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Yes, like a grounding.

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes. In that world, there is a grounding. I can't say that there's fizz and ferment here, though, because this is a corporation. But I never doubt that there are certain projects that, when all is said and done, we can do better than other places can. The problem is the cost. Very much so. It's the cost.

The editor's agenda

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Earlier, speaking off the tape, you made an important remark. In the evolution of Schocken Books, you suggested, when you see certain kinds of books appearing at about the same time, perhaps those choices were governed by the agendas of the editors-in-chief. I suppose you were referring to the editors you've known, but, in its way, that would do doubt have been true in the past. It would have been true when Schocken himself was alive and actively directing the company; equally so when his son and son-in-law were running the company. It's a useful notion to think about at any time, of course. What is Schocken's agenda now?

SUSAN RALSTON: Is your question, what's my agenda?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Perhaps it is. You and Altie now are Schocken Books.

SUSAN RALSTON: Well, that's true only in the most technical sense. I'm the editorial director; she's the managing editor and she also acquires. However, we are integrated into Pantheon on a day-to-day basis. One individual is the promotion/publicity director for both Pantheon and Schocken, another is the production director for both imprints, still another the marketing director for both. They're not Pantheon staff doing work for Schocken out of one drawer in their desk.

As for my agenda: I sense that my predecessor's goal was to make Schocken independent of the other imprints. My goal is to integrate it as much as possible, because I don't want Schocken books to appear to be an afterthought for anyone here. I want people to say, "What are we publishing in September?" and have that "we" mean both imprints. I don't feel that Altie and I are Schocken, period, at all, in any way. I'd be terrified if that were so.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Because you would be small and isolated?

SUSAN RALSTON: Yes: and then who would do these functions for us? How would we get our books sold?

My agenda is also to publish the kinds of books that interest me. It sounds selfish. But it's because in the past I've been obliged to work on books that I really wasn't very interested in. When that's the case, you don't give your all in the same way. You don't respond to proposals the same way if you're not interested in the subject, or if it's Greek to you, or if you're horribly against it in terms of the ideas it expresses. Of course I want to publish books that interest me. I wouldn't be in the business if I didn't. I'd not be a real person if I wanted to publish books that didn't interest me, and I wouldn't do it very well. But I also want to publish books that will not be marginalized by their particularity or their limited sales potential. I don't want to publish books that will be marginalized because

they're at Schocken, when they would not be so marginalized if they were at Jewish Lights, let's say, as a comparison.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What do you mean by "marginalized"?

SUSAN RALSTON: There are proposals for topics that are too narrow for a trade publisher; they belong in a university press or a professional press or an independent Jewish press, a house where they don't have to compete for time--with the [bookselling] reps, at sales conference, or in the marketing meetings--with books of more general interest that have more of a chance for success in the marketplace.

As I said before, we have a strong special-markets division dealing with the Jewish market, among others. But if you have a book that is only going to be sold through those non-retail outlets, why publish it in a company that spends millions of dollars a year to market and sell to Barnes & Noble and independent and secular book stores? Why do it here? Here, we have the resources to publish books that can be sold in all these channels, and we must take advantage of that. And I'm not suggesting that I have to do books that will only have thousands and thousands of readers; that I have to dilute the list, or the Jewish-interest of the list, in order to reach beyond it. If you publish intelligently, you can sell 6,000 copies brilliantly and make money. If it's a book that only has 6,000 readers, you've done a great job. If you have 50,000 copies out, and there are only 6,000 buyers, you've made a big mistake.

The constraint of being part of a corporate entity comes there, in figuring out how to publish intelligently; it doesn't come anywhere else. Nobody says "you can't do Jewish books, you shouldn't do Jewish books," nobody says this is "too Jewish for us," this "isn't Jewish enough for us"; nobody censors us, or anything like that.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Well, there is this. Have you had not to take a book you wished to take because of that?

SUSAN RALSTON: No. There have been a couple of books that I wanted to buy that Sonny didn't sign off on. This is every editor's experience. He had his reasons; but his reasons never had to do with objections to the content. Sonny's objection to a book is either that something about it causes him to think we can't publish it successfully – again, that has no ideological or theological bias – or he thinks that the editor concocted a P&L (laughter), that it's unmoored, let's say, from reality.

But I pick and choose very carefully. It can be agonizing. I'll read something that I'm glad to have read, but then decide, "No, we shouldn't be doing this here." I had a submission, for example, from an agent representing a writer who has written numerous non-fiction books and articles about Jewish and women's experience. Her name is known. This is her first novel. I read about a hundred pages and thought, "This woman has not made the transition to fiction." Taking her on just because of her celebrity wasn't reason enough.

What is of Jewish interest?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: So: your agenda. Behind it, isn't it perhaps the question – and often this can't quite be articulated – what is, then, "of Jewish interest"?

SUSAN RALSTON: That is an interesting question. It's like the joke: if there are two Jews, there are three synagogues. Nobody ever agrees on everything.

What do I think evokes Jewish interest? This is a community with a broad spectrum, the Jewish community. People are interested in different things. If you look at the books we've acquired, that tells you what our sense of this spectrum is. So, THE

FUNERAL PARTY was a beginning in fiction. There is a place for new innovative fiction, not necessarily in English, but in translation, for Schocken.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Do you know of writers coming up, or fiction writers whom we need to know about – I mean, all of us need to know about – but who are Jewish writers?

SUSAN RALSTON: No, I wouldn't be able to say. In these past fifteen months I must have read twenty novels that we are not going to publish. I don't necessarily remember their names.

I do believe – I said this to Sonny a year-and-a-half ago – that the Jewish community is interested in reading about itself. I made a list of books that, I thought, if Schocken had published them, would have been good for us. One of them is *JEW VS. JEW*, by Samuel Freedman. And the Jewish community is interested in reading general cultural history; it's interested in fiction.

And – I just read this – here, in Jonathan Woocher, *SACRED SURVIVAL: The Civil Religion of American Jews*. In 1986, he defined the "American Jewish civil religion" as "an activist religion emphasizing the prestige of Jewish survival and social justice." He finds its first ingredient in the story of the passage from the Holocaust to the rebirth of Israel. These words said something to me. There are many, many, people who identify themselves as Jewish, belong to Jewish organizations, even may be affiliated with synagogues: to them, being Jewish is not just an ethnic identity – but it is not a spiritual identity, either: it's a civil religion. They believe in giving to charity. They believe in helping the downtrodden. It's that old liberal, activist ethic which a lot of people now say represents their Jewish identity. Then, there's the ethnic thing.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: What, exactly, is the "ethnic thing?"

SUSAN RALSTON: For example, a number of people who now trying to figure out exactly what little village their ancestors came from over there; and they're reaching back beyond their grandparents. The Jewish genealogy site went up.⁶ In a year, it had more than two million hits.

The most important project on our table now, which Arthur initiated, is that twenty-two-author, three-volume cultural history of the Jewish people that I told you about. This work is going to establish where Jewish historical scholarship is at this time. I think that that's a very rich mine. People are truly interested in it.

I also think that, perhaps ten years from now, there is going to be another wave of writing. It's not going to be the memoirs of the Holocaust survivors. Rather, their children are going to age, and they are going to start telling their story, or a story of some kind. That is still ahead of us.

So, my "agenda" is to publish books that will be as interesting to other Jewish people as they are to me. That's it!

Also: staying healthy and afloat

SUSAN RALSTON: But my other goal is to do things that keep the place healthy and afloat.

We have a legacy from the great old days of publishing. The people who run this company understand the value of the integrity of this imprint, that it means something. We can be flexible about the boundaries of what the imprint is going to publish. But I have to make sure that we keep up to that standard. I don't know if, ten years from now, when I'm gone from this place and other people have come in, and other people are running

Bertelsmann, and maybe another company owns Bertelsmann, whether that old standard is still going to be kept up.

When I came here, Donald Klopfer [*co-founder, with Bennett Cerf, of Random House*] was here. He was right next door to me. Bob Gottlieb [*former editor-in-chief of Knopf*] was here. Jason Epstein [*former editor at Random House; founder of Anchor Books and “The Reader’s Guide”*] was here; André [*Schiffrin, former editor-in-chief of Pantheon, now director of The New Press*] was here. The people here now are trying to maintain their level of commitment and integrity in an increasingly unhealthy marketplace.

And what is the marketplace going to be like in the future? Three years from now, somebody may say, “You know, there’s another whole realm of publishing of Jewish interest that you could get into and publish electronically.” It could come. I think it will.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: I think it will.

SUSAN RALSTON: That’s the agenda: simply, not to disgrace ourselves, not to let the side down, but, at the same time, not to endanger our survival by sticking to a publishing program that doesn’t answer our own, particular corporate needs. The tradition of the imprint is not, really, a certain kind of book. It is simply the tradition of quality.

End of Part II

In the next issue, Vol. 5, No. 4, Arthur Samuelson, former editorial director of Schocken Books will talk with the Editor of Archipelago about the history, the present, and future of Schocken Books.

The series of conversations about Schocken Books is made possible by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy <<http://www.virginia.edu/vfh>>.

Note: In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, a friend e-mailed Archipelago:

“Bertelsmann has been outstanding. Kept the 1540 Broadway building open all night on Tuesday for those who had no place to get to, free food, and then instantly gave \$2,000,000 to the Firemen and Policeman for victims, aid, etc. I doubt I will ever say anything negative about them again. There seems to be genuine concern for all the employees, constant e-mails and phone messages, encouraging people to stay home if they are more comfortable doing that, with of course no penalty. I am impressed.”

See also:

Part I, A Conversation with Altie Karper, *Archipelago*, Vol. 5, No. 2

and

A Conversation with Marion Boyars, Vol. 1 No. 3

A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, Vol. 1 No. 4 *and* Vol. 2, No. 1

A Conversation with William Strachan, Vol. 2, No. 4

A Conversation with Samuel H. Vaughan, Vol. 3, No. 2

Reminiscence: Lee Goerner (1947-1995), Vol. 3, No. 3

A Conversation with Odile Hellier, Vol. 4, No. 1

A Conversation with Calvin Reid about Electronic Publishing, Vol. 4, No. 4

¹ See “A Conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie,” *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 4:

KATHERINE McNAMARA: Atheneum had what you called “luck.”

MICHAEL BESSIE: Sure did. How many publishing houses that pretend to be literary have a number-one best-seller on each of their first three lists?

KATHERINE McNAMARA: And those were?

MICHAEL BESSIE: The first was the Schwartz-Bart. Second, the first *THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT* 1960, by Theodore White. And the third was *THE ROTHSCHILDS*, by Frederick Morton, which sold very well. The timing was right, as we said before, and, to a certain extent, as Mr. Dooley said, “The victor belongs to the spoils.” Cornelia will tell you about what young Roger Straus told us when he went back [to Farrar, Straus & Giroux] — for the second time, I guess — after they’d had that terrific success with that novel by the lawyer, what was his name, Scott Turow. Roger said, “You know, everybody’s now got to have an assistant.”

CORNELIA BESSIE: Young Roger, whom I’m very fond of, has a marvelously clear and keen view of publishing. He once said to me, “The most dangerous moment in a publisher’s life is after the first big success.” It’s a very smart observation.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: But you didn’t bobble it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: In a sense, we did.

CORNELIA BESSIE: All of a sudden, there were 60 people on the payroll.

KATHERINE McNAMARA: When was this?

MICHAEL BESSIE: In the course of two or three years after our start. We had to make a second call on our investors; we collected another almost a million, because we needed it.

² André Schiffrin, who moved to acquire Schocken Books, has written a widely-remarked-upon polemic on the enormous changes in the book business. In the following passage he describes his acquisition of Schocken Books as a hoped-for outlet for pressure from the Newhouse family to increase return on investment:

For a while, I thought we might be able to break out of the trap of Newhouse’s profit expectations by expanding Pantheon through acquisitions.... If we could find the right firm, however, and could integrate it successfully, Pantheon might make more money. I was therefore very interested when, in 1987, I was approached by lawyers asking if we would take on Schocken Books....

Schocken had never been very profitable and had been maintained by the family’s holdings in real estate, just as the original Schocken had been subsidized by a department store in Berlin. The purchase price, by Newhouse standards, was small, and I felt it was important to provide a safe haven for the company. I insisted to Newhouse’s people that such a deal would make sense and, after months of detailed investigation, an agreement was made. It later struck me as ironic that a purchase that entailed so little risk should have been made with such care, while the far more dubious purchase of Crown was made so peremptorily.

With the financial pressures from Newhouse intensifying, the thought of relaunching Schocken gave me a new lease on life. We decided not merely to reissue the old books, but to deal with them in a manner worthy of their importance. New translations of Kafka’s work were commissioned, under the editorship of Mark Anderson of Columbia University’s German department. Previously untranslated material from Kafka’s *oeuvre* was included. We took on a series of books, some dealing with Israel and Eastern Europe, and others on the history of World War II. Schocken’s excellent list on the Holocaust was brought back into print, though I was shocked to hear from one of Random House’s (Jewish) vice-presidents, Bruce Harris, that he wished “we would stop hitting him over the head with all these Holocaust titles” because they were not going to make enough money.

By the fall of 1989, our joint list [Pantheon/Schocken] had grown substantially, and I was proud of the books we had added to the imprint. But because we wanted to remain faithful to the company’s history and its authors, the possibility of quick profits was ruled out. In the first years our investment lost money, since the repackaging of the list and the retranslation of Kafka were expensive undertakings.

In the end what appeared at first to be a temporary solution to Pantheon’s problems with Random House became, in fact, the source of additional pressure on an already strained relationship.

-André Schiffrin, *THE BUSINESS OF BOOKS: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* (London and New York: Verso, 2000, pp. 85-87)

³ I quote Susan Ralston but have drawn on information given me by Altie Karper and other sources.

I might add that I remember the firing of André Schiffrin. It was a *cause-célèbre* in publishing and among a number of outspoken writers, because of his distinguished history (he had been the protégé of Kurt and Helen Wolff, the German Jewish publishers and founders of Pantheon and contemporaries of Salman Schocken) and because of Pantheon's reputation for publishing books of high literary quality and of social and political thought. A strong but finally useless protest was made by some editors and writers, among them Studs Terkel, who picketed Random House. They charged that the owners' untraditional demand for a high profit from a serious publishing house caused *de facto* market censorship. André Schiffrin, *op. cit.*, discusses this matter at some length. A critical history of the "wave of change" at Random House is beyond the scope of this discussion, but such a history is needed and should be written.

⁴ Used when speaking of Kafka's work being represented by his friend Max Brod, the word "marketability" is nuanced with historical irony. In Part I, Altie Karper said: "Interestingly enough, after '33 was when Schocken began publishing Kafka. Kafka had been published by a number of secular German publishers. Then along came the rule that Jews could be published only by Jews, and Christians only by Christians; and that's how Schocken acquired Kafka. What's even more interesting is that one of Kafka's publishers was Verlag Kurt Wolff, which was the predecessor of Pantheon. It is kind of nice that we're all back together again, here."

More to the point, Arthur Samuelson wrote:

"When the Nazis introduced their racial laws they exempted Schocken Verlag, a Jewish publisher, from the ban against publishing Jewish authors on condition that its books would be sold only to Jews...."

Max Brod offered Schocken the world publishing rights to all of Kafka's works. This offer was initially rejected by Lambert Schneider, Schocken Verlag's editor in chief, who regarded Kafka's work as outside his mandate to publish books that could reacquire German Jewry with its distinguished heritage. He also doubted its public appeal. His employer also had his doubts about the marketability of six volumes of Kafka's novels, stories, diaries, and letters, although he recognized their universal literary quality as well as their potential to undermine the official campaign to denigrate German Jewish culture. But he was urged by one of his editors, Moritz Spitzer, to see in Kafka a quintessentially 'Jewish' voice that could give meaning to the new reality that had befallen German Jewry and would demonstrate the central role of Jews in German culture. Accordingly, BEFORE THE LAW, an anthology drawn from Kafka's diaries and short stories, appeared in 1934 in Schocken Verlag's *Bücherei* series, a collection of books aimed to appeal to a popular audience, and was followed a year later – the year of the infamous Nuremberg Laws – by Kafka's three novels. The Schocken editions were the first to give Kafka widespread distribution in Germany. Martin Buber, in a letter to Brod, praised these volumes as 'a great possession' that could 'show how one can live marginally with complete integrity and without loss of background.' (From THE LETTERS OF MARTIN BUBER [New York: Schocken Books, 1991], p. 431)

Inevitably, many of the books Schocken sold ended up in non-Jewish hands, giving German readers – at home and in exile – their only access to one of the century's greatest writers. Klaus Mann wrote in the exile journal *Sammlung* that 'the collected works of Kafka, offered by the Schocken Verlag in Berlin, are the most noble and most significant publications that have come out of Germany.' Praising Kafka's books as 'the epoch's purest and most singular works of literature,' he noted with astonishment that 'this spiritual event has occurred within a splendid isolation, in a ghetto far from the German cultural ministry.' Soon after this article appeared, the Nazi government put Kafka's novels on its blacklist of 'harmful and undesirable writings.' Schocken moved his production to Prague, where he published Kafka's diaries and letters. Interestingly, despite the ban on the novels, he was able to continue printing and distributing his earlier volume of Kafka's short stories in Germany itself until the government closed down Schocken Verlag in 1939. The German occupation of Prague that same year put an end to Schocken's operations in Europe."

-Arthur Samuelson, "A Kafka for the 21st Century,"

Jewish Heritage Online Magazine

<<http://www.jhom.com/bookshelf/kafka/intro.html?&printable=true>>

⁵ FRAGMENTS, by Benjamin Wilkomirski, tr. Carol Brown Janeway, purported to be a Holocaust memoir by a survivor who recounted the terrible experience of his childhood. However, sometime after publication, the author was proved to have used a false identity and to have constructed a fiction. He is said to be a somewhat disturbed person.

⁶ Jewish Genealogy Society <<http://www.jgsny.org/>>

Authors and Books Mentioned (published by Schocken Books, unless otherwise noted):

- S.Y. Agnon, DAYS OF AWE (ed.)
 TWENTY-ONE STORIES
 A BOOK THAT WAS LOST AND OTHER STORIES
- Aharon Appelfeld, THE CONVERSION
 THE IRON TRACKS
 THE RETREAT
 UNTO THE SOUL
- Bernard Baumberger, THE STORY OF JUDAISM
- Julian Barnes, FLAUBERT'S PARROT
 TALKING IT OVER
 A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 10-1/2 CHAPTERS (all Knopf)
- Nathan Englander, FOR THE RELIEF OF UNBEARABLE URGES (Knopf)
- Nomi Eve, THE FAMILY ORCHARD (Knopf)
- Samuel Freedman, JEW VS. JEW: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry (Simon & Schuster)
- Martin Gilbert, THE JEWS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
- Carl Hiasson, STRIP TEASE (Knopf)
- Kazuo Ishiguro, REMAINS OF THE DAY (Knopf)
- Howard Kushner, WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
- Stefan Maeschler, THE WILKOMIRSKI AFFAIR: A Study in Biographical Truth
- Benny Morris, RIGHTEOUS VICTIMS (Knopf)
- Cecil Roth, A HISTORY OF THE JEWS
- Jean-Paul Sartre, ANTI-SEMITES AND THE JEW
- Theodore Schocken, "Schocken Books: Twenty-five Years of Judaica Publishing in America,"
Judaica Book News, Fall/Winter 1971.
- Gershom Scholem, MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISHMYSTICISM
- André Schiffrin, THE BUSINESS OF BOOKS (Verso)
- Melfred E. Spiro, KIBBUTZ
- Graham Swift, WATERLAND (Picador; Poseidon Press)
 LAST ORDERS (Picador; Knopf)
 THE SWEET-SHOP OWNER (Picador; Knopf)
- Ludmila Ulitskaya, THE FUNERAL PARTY
- Elie Wiesel, THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE
 THE ACCIDENT
 ALL RIVERS RUN TO THE SEA
 AND THE SEA IS NEVER FULL
 A BEGGER IN JERUSALEM
 DAWN
 THE FIFTH SON
 THE FORGOTTEN
 FROM THE KINGDOM OF MEMORY
 THE GATES OF THE FOREST
 JEW TODAY
 NIGHT
 THE OATH
 THE TESTAMENT
 THE TOWN BEYOND THE WALL
 THE TRIAL OF GOD;
 TWILIGHT
- Jonathan Woocher, SACRED SURVIVAL: The Civil Religion of American Jews (Indiana University Press)
- Various authors, CULTURES OF THE JEWS: From the Bible to Contemporary Israel and America (forthcoming)
- Leon Wieseltier, KADDISH (Knopf)
- Benjamin Wilkomirski, FRAGMENTS
- Mark Zborowsky & Elizabeth Hertzog, LIFE IS WITH PEOPLE: The Culture of the Shtetl

Related links:

Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc. <<http://www.jgsny.org/>>
 Schocken Books <<http://www.randomhouse.com/schocken/>>

List of Books Published by Schocken Verlag, Berlin 1933-38 <<http://www.nunbetbooks.co.il/schocken.html>>
“The Schocken Institute for Jewish Research <<http://www.jtsa.edu/academic/abul9798/isrprog.html>> of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, housed in the Schocken Library building in Jerusalem, is a research institute dedicated to the exploration of Hebrew liturgical poetry. The Schocken Library Building is an architectural masterpiece. Upon his arrival in Israel in 1934, Salman Schocken, the publishing magnate, commissioned the German-Jewish expressionist architect, Erich Mendelsohn, to design a building for the purpose of housing the collection of books, manuscripts and incunabula that Schocken had brought with him from Berlin.”

Schocken Books Teachers Guide to THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES, tr. Edward Fox
<<http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/bible.html>>

Anthony David Skinner, “Collecting Memory: Salman Schocken and the Jewish Renaissance,” National Foundation for Jewish Culture: Jewish Scholarship <http://www.jewishculture.org/1998/schol_schocken.htm>

A Kafka For The 21st Century by Arthur Samuelson, publisher, Schocken Books
<<http://www.jhom.com/bookshelf/kafka/intro.html?&printable=true>>

“On the occasion of the publication by Schocken Books of a new translation based on the restored text of The Castle, PEN ... sponsored an evening of tribute, reflection, and re-examination of the work of Franz Kafka. The evening, directed by Tom Palumbo, took place on Thursday, March 26, 1998, 8:00 p.m. in The Town Hall, New York City.” *Jewish Heritage Online Magazine* broadcasts recordings of that evening. <<http://www.jhom.com/bookshelf/kafka/index.html>>

FIVE UNCOLLECTED POEMS

Walt McDonald

Hammering Ice to Slush

Wind flings snow over stalks like cobblestones.
Cattle wait out the storm in windbreaks
far from barns. They know when it's over

we'll drive out on tractors, hauling hay
and hard alfalfa pellets. They fear no evil,
since every dawn we come and hammer ice to slush.

Nights, we rock in the dark and watch for stars.
Children we raised are safe in cities lit
by a billion kilowatts. We know spring runoff

will water summer's hay, we'll own the ranch
someday, if luck and hard work save us, if God's
still in his heaven, if we're still on the earth.

Mobeetee, Where Faith and Neighbors Failed

There's nothing here but widows
and a dozen bachelors inside the boundaries
town signs claim. The average age is eighty,
clerks and ranchers hobbling along on oil wells

or victory gardens and food stamps.
Granddaddy moved here with Quakers in 1880,
seeking peace at the top of Texas, before most,
disgusted, rolled covered wagons to the Gulf.

Iowa farmers, they bartered acres
from Comanches for Bibles and a bony cow,
a steal like Manhattan Island. It says
Mobeetee on the map, the puzzling word

they heard breech-cloth Comanches say.
Smooth-chested natives never smiled,
saying it slowly to their faces, Mo-bee-tee:
buffalo dung, the runny kind, not chips

women gathered in baskets and burned.
These flat plains seldom rained, crops failed,
and wind blew down the tents. Years ago,
I found stone walls of a house they abandoned

after drought and more dead babies,
after cowboys told Granddaddy what Mobeetee meant.
One turned his head to spit from his stallion,
not even smiling as they trotted off.

Here are Granddaddy's first wife's stone,
and his. Grandmother let them stay,
but had herself brought back and interred with him,
today, believing in words, one flesh.

Praise

Da Vinci carved hands like that, but fists
of this family? Curved vessels bulge
under skin like thinnest leather,
hands excitingly relaxed but powerful,

enough muscle to feed the knuckles blood,
but not an ounce of fat. Not a blotch,
not one age spot on women over fifty.
My wife carves lamb and hands the platter

to a double cousin who's come back.
I never met him in Saigon or later, until today.
Like her brothers, her cousin is huge,
ducks under the door frame, a giant

near his mother and Egyptian wife.
No wonder my wife is tough, that our boys
are bigger than me, our daughters beautiful
and bold. Her cousin's grandchildren play

outside with ours, cousins adopted
from different landscapes, some scarred
with skin grafts. Some hobble on plastic legs,
one without arms. Her cousin could hold my skull

like a softball, man who works with steel
around the world, who hunts down bombs and mines,
turns killing fields to farms. Her brothers ranch,
donating beef to the town's food bank.

Often, they grab me by the arms and scuffle,
horseplay like one of their own--their massive hands,
in spite of gloves, like cactus with all the thorns
rubbed off, their hard-boned faces bronze.

Where the Train Slows Down

Slumgullion and bread fed bums
on Grandmother's ranch near the railroad
in the Great Depression, Granddaddy dead.
At first she lost riders and cows,

barbed wire cut down, old cars abandoned
in her pasture, trails trampled past her ranch
by refugees. Windmills and a foreman
old as her father saved the herd.

The bank failed before it foreclosed,
and calves brought enough by fall.
Hobos spread the word for miles by signs
I never saw--Look for the house ten miles ahead,

around the bend where the train slows down.
That widow will feed you. I watched them
two at a time, making a trail from the tracks
to her back porch. Hats in hands,

they would ask, but she already had bowls
and spoons, tin mugs for water at the well.
They sat on the porch and ate,
or out on the grass under oaks,

then rinsed them clean and stacked them,
found the axe in the stump and chopped
a few thick logs, or raked the yard
the hundredth time that month.

Pronghorns Show Us the Way

From the road, we see antelopes loping away.
We like the way they glide, soaring over slopes.
Pronghorns show us the way, simply to stay together.
Our eyes rake autumn leaves like ore, panning horizons

before they fade. We hike flat miles toward sundown,
alchemy of oaks, the fleeting shimmer of gold.
Nothing glitters at night but stars. Outside Saigon,
I liked the long, boring hour of sundown, the last glow

before midnight, before the blaze of tracers,
the random rockets. When explosions stopped,
total darkness. Now, in the west, storms rumble
like after battles, lighting the sky in flashes.

Antelopes graze head down, praying hosanna to grass.
Far off, a car backfires like a rifle, and they bolt,
they never pause, they dash to wide horizons
and vanish, but not without a fight.

ENDNOTES

from Ars Poetica?

.....

There was a time when only wise books were read
helping us to bear our pain and misery.
This, after all, is not quite the same
as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
People therefore preserve silent integrity
thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

Czeslaw Milosz
tr. by the author and Lilian Vallee

&&&&&&

SASHA CHOI GOES HOME

“Scientists tell us that human life on this earth is 50,000 years old, or 150,000 – whatever their numbers are. But I believe we are much older than that; that life itself is much older. I can see this as if I am remembering. You know, I feel such affection for human beings. We can do so much. For instance, a tree is sick: we can find a way to heal it! The tree can't do that. I

think we all were together once, we were – globules, that’s the best way I can describe it, we were little globes floating around, bumping against each other, streaming along. We knew each other; but most people forget this, I guess. They don’t pay attention to it, and don’t remember; they don’t try to remember, or don’t want to remember. But I remember: we were all connected, we were all floating around together. Now when I walk down the street and pass so many people I am thrilled, because I’ve known all of them! We walk right by each other now, but we all came from the same source. This makes me so happy!

-Sasha Choi

Sasha Choi is one of those, whom some in pity might call a damaged person, who walks along the perimeter of the visible world, who sees what we do not and knows in advance that which we might perhaps come to learn. For some years she has been passing through my life, insisting gently but firmly that I *pay attention*. As I do, for long moments, then glance sideways, then slightly withdraw. Tactfully, patiently, she too withdraws for a time, until gradually I will become aware that the phone is going to ring and I will hear her voice again.

I will wonder, is she safe? Will I really try to *hear* her? What can I do for her? (Or, can it be that she is watching out for me?)

In May, she set off across country on the train. Her journey was interrupted, however, when she began to talk rather too urgently to strangers. At a small station in Colorado the train made an unexpected stop, and she was carried off by the police and placed in a mental home. She phoned some days afterward to tell me what had happened. This occurred not long before the summer issue of this journal went live, and so I wrote about her in “Endnotes.” Several readers responded in sympathy and with fine, almost anguished recognition. Cynthia Tedesco, whose story “Suitcases” appeared in the same number, was moved to write: “Sasha Choi reminded me so much of some my patients at Creedmore State Psychiatric Hospital when I was there very briefly (9 months) as an Audiologist many years ago. I kept wanting to say to those souls, ‘Sh! Just don’t tell this to your doctors and social workers!’ There is nothing in our culture to honor their gifts and protect their lives. Nothing.”

Since then, Sasha has contacted me twice. I thought I should pass on the word that she is safe.

On August 17 she phoned to say she had been released from the mental hospital, where she had been held for thirty days while on her way West, and was with her mother in California. She sounded fine, whole, happy, strong. It was good being with her mother, who needed her, she said, and she speculated that perhaps this was to be her work now. She had chits for “pretty good” housing nearby, but would probably stay with her mother in the apartment, for a while at least, to see how that would work.

But was her father living there? I asked. Yes, she said, and she was still afraid of him; but he was more afraid of her, because he was going to die first and he knew it. (She implied a mental battle being waged between them on a shamanic level.) She felt she should stay at home, too, because it was time to face her father. She had to learn how to do this at last. She felt she could handle the situation. It would test her, but she welcomed the test. She felt she would learn a great deal.

She wouldn't stay on the phone long, as her father would soon return, but wanted to let me know that she was all right. Perhaps I could forward the cartons of her journals, that are stored in my house? She would write me a letter and tell me where to send them. Of course I would. I was glad to hear from her, and told her so, warmly.

She phoned again, on September 14, I believe it was. She is still in Southern California, and is happy to be with her mother, but finds life difficult in the small apartment with both parents. She was calling to ask if I would recommend her to the committee in charge of a nearby apartment complex she has applied to enter. Yes, I replied; with enthusiasm. She sounded tired but said she feels resolute. In the days before September 11, however, she had been depressed and in pain. "You know I feel the weight of such things in my body," she said.

Yes, I said.

I mentioned the piece about her in *Archipelago* and the friendly responses it had received. She had forgotten about this and was puzzled, or concerned. She asked how she could read what I had written. I would mail her a printed copy, I said. She gave me her current address, for the copy, and promised the new one as soon as possible for sending on her journals, but said to wait till she moved and had room for the boxes. Again our conversation was brief. She did say that she might write me a letter, after all, not like the earlier ones from the mental hospital (there had been two; they were difficult reading) in which she hadn't even made sense to herself because of the anti-psychotic drugs she had been given, but calmer.

I felt that she is clear and thoughtful and has a great deal of work to do, and that she has set her mind to do it.

-KM

Previous Endnotes:

Sasha Choi in America, Vol. 5, No. 1
 A Local Habitation and A Name, Vol. 5, No. 1
 The Blank Page, Vol. 4, No. 4
 The Poem of the Grand Inquisitor, Vol. 4, No. 3
 On the Marionette Theater, Vol. 4, Nos. 1/2
 The Double, Vol. 3, No. 4
 Folly, Love, St. Augustine, Vol. 3, No. 3
 On Memory, Vol. 3, No. 2
 Passion, Vol. 3, No. 1
 A Flea, Vol. 2, No. 4
 On Love, Vol. 2, No. 3
 Fantastic Design, with Nooses, Vol. 2, No. 1
 Kundera's Music Teacher, Vol. 1, No. 4
 The Devil's Dictionary; Economics for Poets, Vol. 1, No. 3
 Hecuba in New York; Déformation Professionnelle, Vol. 1, No. 2
 Art, Capitalist Relations, and Publishing on the Web, Vol. 1, No. 1

Recommended Reading

1901: Pocket Messages

Paris – The “pocket coherer” is said to be a wonder in its ways. One carries it about with him in his clothing – it is not much bigger than a watch – and is enabled by its means to receive wireless telegraphic messages wherever he may happen to be. Wireless telegraphy is in its infancy as yet. Within a few years it is expected to develop marvels, rendering it practicable for a business man to connect his office with other offices, business establishments, and even private houses all over the city.

The International Herald Tribune
“In Our Pages: 100, 75, and 50 Years Ago”
15 May 2001

&&&&&&

Friends of Archipelago, themselves distinguished writers, suggest books we might want to read:

John Casey <anitrap@aol.org> (SPARTINA, winner of the National Book Award; AMERICAN ROMANCE; TESTIMONY AND Demeanor; THE HALF-LIFE OF HAPPINESS; Contributing Editor of *Archipelago*):

“Negative to positive:

“René Weiss, *YELLOW CROSS: THE STORY OF THE LAST CATHARS 1290-1329*: what a slog! But it reminded me how much I loved *MONTAILLOU: PROMISED LAND OF ERROR*, by Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, which tells much the same story more swiftly, elliptically and enchantingly. Many of the Cathars were killed during the XIIIth century but some more remote groups survived, the village of MontailloU for one. The basis of Leroy Ladurie’s book is the surviving text of a decade-long inquisition by a bishop who later became Pope. No torture to extract confessions (some convicted heretics were burned, some got jail terms), but the interrogations went on for so long and were so extensive that the prisoners and witnesses covered every aspect of their lives, not just their beliefs but their jobs, love affairs, travels – how it felt to be a shepherd, a priest, a noblewoman in the Middle Ages. How extraordinary to hear voices that spoke Occitan, which was then translated into Latin, then into French, and now English – still alive.” René Weiss, *YELLOW CROSS: THE STORY OF THE LAST CATHARS 1290-1329* (Knopf, 2001). Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *MONTAILLOU: PROMISED LAND OF ERROR* tr. Barbara Bray (George Braziller, 1978; Vintage p.b., 1979)

“I’m a fan of Evan S. Connell’s, especially his novel *MRS. BRIDGE* and his biography of Custer, *SON OF THE MORNING STAR*. *DEUS LO VULT* is an historical novel about the Crusades. It is told by a French crusader whose forbears were also crusaders, so family lore and chronicles allow him to be both a first-person narrator and an omniscient one. Neat trick. It is a skillful gallop through a couple of centuries, but I was reminded how much more I like Stephen Runciman’s *HISTORY OF THE CRUSADES* (three vols.). Runciman is well known as an historian but he also has the grace to narrate as well as Parkman or Prescott. He does the overview, the battle by battle, the power struggles, the culture shock (and more importantly the culture shift), as well as some small scenes that are like raised ghosts.” Evan S. Connell Jr., *MRS. BRIDGE* (North Point, 1969; Picador, 1989); *SON OF THE MORNING STAR* (North Point, 1984); *DEUS LO VULT* (Counterpoint, 2001). Stephen Runciman, *HISTORY OF THE CRUSADES*, Vols. I- III (Cambridge University Press, 1955-62).

“Wladyslaw Szpilman’s obituary (q.v.) gives a good introduction to this memoir. Szpilman was a well known Polish pianist and composer. Also a Jew. How he managed to survive from 1939 to 1945 in Warsaw is a riveting and horrifying story. *THE PAINTED BIRD* by Jerzy Kosinski and *WARTIME LIES* by Louis Begley are both fascinating fictions that deal with the same period but are about heroes who are children who can only guess part of the truth ; the authors work indirectly through them. Szpilman’s truth is unguarded. Because he was a grown man, and perhaps because he had a fully realized sensibility as a composer and pianist, Szpilman is able to tell not only his own story but record the lives and deaths of others. He does this with a clear, considered voice that trusts the reader to feel what should be felt.” **Wladyslaw Szpilman**, *THE PIANIST: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945* tr. Bell (St. Martins, 1999; Victor Gollanz, 1999; PicadorUSA p.b., 2000). Obituary, *The Independent* <<http://members.aol.com/alinamusic>>. **Jerzy Kosinski**, *THE PAINTED BIRD* (Modern Library, 1970). **Louis Begley**, *WARTIME LIES* (Knopf, 1991; Ivy Books p.b., 1992).

George Garrett gpg@virginia.edu (*THE DEATH OF THE FOX; ENTERED FROM THE SUN; THE SUCCESSION; DO, LORD, REMEMBER ME; THE KING OF BABYLON SHALL NOT COME AGAINST YOU ; WHISTLING IN THE DARK, et alia*):

“Recently I (more or less) have recovered from an illness that created vision problems and rendered me unable to read anything for about six months. It’s glory to be able to read again, but right away the question was – what to read, now that I can? A regime of masterpieces, the ones I was always going to get around to someday, made some sense, but seemed too much like a . . . well, an assignment. Why not read frivolously, impulsively? After all, in the wake of serious illness, it seems a little late to begin a genuinely serious program of self-improvement.

“Still unable to go out to browse or shop, I was at the mercy of book reviews and so I read one in *The Washington Post* by Carolyn See, who’s a good and regular reviewer, and ordered, sight unseen, a work of fiction, *ANGELICA’S GROTTTO*, by Russell Hoban. Though I haven’t kept up with Hoban’s work, and there is a lot of it, I had deeply enjoyed and admired (and here recommend) the tour de force *RIDLEY WALKER*, many years ago.

“I opened *GROTTTO* and read it straight through, front to back. It proved to be good and serious fun and presents a lively picture, and I think an accurate one, of London here and now. Hoban, an American, has lived in that city for years. *GROTTTO* is a fine novel on its own terms, but also seems oddly relevant in a number of ways. For one thing, the protagonist, Harold, is exactly the same age I am. He’s 72, a geezer, definitely geriatric. For good reasons, you just don’t get many books these days featuring geezers. And Harold is not much better off than a lot of us. Truth is, and emerges, Harold has a string of ailments, a regular rosary of dread diseases and conditions, that make him a real challenge to the hard-pressed British National Health Service. Throughout the deftly plotted story he is going into or coming out of his neighborhood Casualty, which is what the Brits call the Emergency Room. His list of drugs and medicines on hand easily dwarfs my own cache of pill bottles.

“I take some genuine comfort in Hoban’s ability to tell a lively tale about a geezer. Harold somehow or other manages to carry on a very busy, interesting and often troubling life, including a complicated, sex-driven, crazy love affair with a very dangerous and gifted young woman. He is a failed painter who has earned a modest, but enviable reputation as an art critic. He is working on a book about the complex relationship of art and pornography; and his interest is larger – the give and take of high art and pop culture (including pornography).

“Meanwhile, Harold is about as horny as man or beast, at any age, can be. More or less impotent, the old guy still has a profound and powerful sex drive. This is the first piece of fiction – except for Philip Roth’s *THE HUMAN STAIN* – I have yet encountered that deals directly and seriously (though in a highly comic context) with the sexual feelings, habits and appetites of the elderly. In that sense, what Hoban has done here has been to expose the reality behind the smokescreen of jokes and winks and elbow nudges with which we preserve our little secret, that old-timers are as horny or even hornier than teenagers. They are swept away by all the same crazy chemicals – a last call before the body bids us, one and all, a thieves’ farewell.

“Hoban is able to tell this strong and funny story in a wonderfully transparent and accessible (though uncompromising) prose, able to make you care about his characters without false sentiments or sympathy. It is as excellent a novel as I have found out there so far, worth waiting half a year for. Because it is published by a small house, you might miss it. I’m pleased to recommend it strongly.” **Russell Hoban**, *RIDLEY WALKER* (Summit, 1980; Jonathan Cape, 1980; Indiana University Press expanded edition, 1998; IUP p.b., 1998); *ANGELICA’S GROTTTO* (Carroll and Graf, 2001).

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