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For me the personal highlight of reading this collection of reminiscences of Jewish life in Carlton from 1925 to 1945 was the inclusion of a chapter by one of my relatives, my father’s cousin, whom I had never associated with Carlton. Bernie Zerman’s parents and brother migrated to Australia from Warsaw in 1926 and Bernie was born in 1932, some thirteen years after his brother, Percy. Bernie’s father, Leon, was actively engaged in the Jehudea Welcome Social Club, which assisted the growing stream of new arrivals escaping from Polish impoverishment and anti-Semitism to settle in Australia where, despite hopes that they would find a golden land, many faced an economically precarious future. Carlton, with its cheap housing and proximity to the Queen Victoria Market, was where these Jewish migrants initially settled before dispersing ‘south of the river’ to join their more established co-religionists. Although Bernie’s father did not shirk from his philanthropic obligations to the community and succeeded economically after a period of struggle, his family’s story diverges markedly from other stories...
presented in this collection. His mother, Edzia, was actively engaged in the family business, with minimal interest in homemaking. Unlike many of the contributors, Bernie did not come from a Yiddish-speaking home, cocooned in a village-like milieu of Jewish shopkeepers and religious observance. He describes his family as outward looking, tolerant and as ‘secular, liberal and left-leaning’, with a wide circle of non-Jewish friends, many of whom were well-known intellectuals and artists, including Vance and Nettie Palmer and Yosl Bergner. This last snippet of information particularly piqued my interest because, although over the years I have written about the links between interwar Australian writers and artists and the Carlton Jewish community, I was totally unaware of this family connection.

My excitement when discovering ‘lost’ family history in this volume suggests an important reason for its publication – its ability to reconnect descendants of those who experienced Jewish life in Carlton with what has now become a distant memory of a once vibrant community, even for those who were there at the time. After reading this book I am sure that contributors’ children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren alike will take a moment to put down their cafe lattes and look at Carlton with new eyes as they try to imagine streets populated by their Yiddish-speaking forbears, amongst them children, bringing home live chickens from the Victoria market to be slaughtered for the Shabbat meal.

Family history aside, the book also represents a useful source for those wanting to gain a nuanced understanding of the history of Jewish Carlton before 1945, especially because of its clear delineation of three quite distinctive groups of Jewish migrants who found their way there. Polish Jews, like the Zermans, formed the largest cohort. In the latter part of the 1920s to the early 1930s Polish Jews arrived in Australia to seek relief from persecution and impoverishment. The previously most popular destination, the United States, was now out of reach for many because of the imposition of quotas that restricted the numbers of migrants allowed in from each country. A second group comprised Russian Jews who had managed to leave Russia, especially the Ukraine, prior to World War One. Some came directly to Australia, settling in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, while many others had first tried, unsuccessfully, to make a life in Palestine. When they could no longer cope with the economic and political hardships in Palestine, they joined family members who had pioneered life in Australia. The Russian/Palestinian migration extended over a long period, but peaked in the late 1920s, creating new challenges for the Carlton community. Whereas Polish Jews were well served by the established Yiddishist cultural organisation, the Kadimah, newly arrived Hebrew speakers felt culturally and linguistically marginalised. Eliyahu Honig describes how the situation was to some extent rectified with the establishment in 1928 of the Ivriya (Eretz Israel Society), which promoted the maintenance of modern Hebrew and the teaching of Zionist history. A final group of arrivals came directly to Australia from eastern Europe just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War and in the shadows of impending doom.
Not surprisingly, like many collections of memoir history, *A Shtetl in Ek Velt*, does have limitations as a historical account. Indeed, the editor openly acknowledges that she is not a professional historian and the book is a labour of love. The 54 contributors (with the exception of Yosl Bergner, who provided an extract from his previously published autobiography, and Sam Lipski, who reflects on community responses to the establishment of the State of Israel) were asked to write down their recollections of Jewish life in Carlton. A number of contributors, in fact, resided outside of Carlton, some coming from as far afield as Williamstown, and recount recollections of regular visits. To prompt their memory respondents were sent a form to fill in with details about their family background and their settlement. Although the form was meant to be used for general guidance only, many of the writers appear to follow its structure very closely and this leads to quite a lot of repetition in the structure of the stories, as does the fact that a number of the contributors are related and tell overlapping stories. A further limitation is that because, understandably, so many of the accounts are of childhoods spent in Carlton (hence the subtitle ‘54 Stories of Growing Up in Jewish Carlton’ [my emphasis]), there is a tendency for the stories to gloss over the difficulties that must have confronted adults at the time. Perhaps because children were shielded by their parents from some of the harsher realities of life, their memories of family, schools and *shuls*, Jewish education, shopkeepers and food are suffused with a nostalgia that needs to be approached with some skepticism. According to the editor’s introduction, this was, indeed, an ‘idyllic’ period for children, but whether this was true for the broader Jewish community remains open to question.

Two stories that stand out because of their relative lack of sentimentality are those of Malche Brown and Al Spilman. Unlike most of the accounts in the book, they focus on memories of Carlton during and immediately after the Second World War.

Malche Brown, who was born in Poland in 1914, arrived in Australia in 1939 to join her husband, Chaim. Given her great age in 2010 when the book was being compiled, she recounted her story to her son-in-law, rather than write it down. The interview must have been very long so the editor has cut out portions of the transcript and provides summaries that help to contextualise Malche’s story. In a matter-of-fact tone Malche describes how through hard work and judicious saving she and her husband managed to buy a house in East Brunswick in 1941. Her description of an earlier Carlton rental property, which had no kitchen or running water inside, is a timely reminder of the slum conditions endured by so many Carlton residents. Her story also underlines how important community support networks were in helping her (and other newcomers) to settle in times of hardship. Thus, as her husband established himself financially, he too assisted fellow Jews in need and after the war sponsored many refugees fleeing postwar Europe. A highlight of the story is the vivid depiction of the sometimes fractious, but always stimulating, world of the Kadimah, and the affirmation at its conclusion...
of Malche and Chaim’s attachment to Yiddish cultural and linguistic traditions. Although Malche’s story covers similar ground to many others in the book, its strength lies in the fact that it is told from the perspective of someone who had an adult’s understanding of what was happening at the time – a perspective that goes some way to eschewing sentimentalism, while still celebrating achievement.

By contrast, Al Spilman’s memories are indubitably shaped by his childhood, but, unlike other childhood memories of Carlton, his are infused by sadness. Al was born in Melbourne in 1941, three years after his mother and father (aged in their late thirties and mid-forties respectively) arrived from Poland. He was an only, but emotionally neglected, child of deeply traumatised parents who seemed never to recover from the tragedy wreaked upon their families by the Holocaust, or to adjust to life in Australia. Whereas his parents cut themselves off from social contact with the Jewish community, Al embraced it, finding friendship among other Jewish families and participating in community activities. Of particular interest too are Al’s references to his non-Jewish working-class neighbours, hard-drinking wharfies, bricklayers, panel beaters, and painters and dockers, who yelled out anti-Semitic insults at passing Jews. While Al remembers Jewish Carlton fondly because it provided a refuge for him from family grief, of all the stories in the book, this one is the most revealing account of a community of considerable public achievement that, nonetheless, was built on private struggles and tragedy.

I am aware that the author had limited resources in producing this book, and its glossary of Yiddish terms is a considerable achievement in itself, but readers would certainly have benefited from a more elaborated academic apparatus. An extended introduction containing more details of the historical context of the community would have given those without specialist or family knowledge greater understanding of what was being described, as would some explanation for the dispersal of the community after the end of the war. A brief biography of the authors themselves beyond what is available in their stories would have further contextualised their accounts. (The benefits of this approach are evident in Malche’s chapter.) Contributors were asked to supply family photographs and they certainly bring the community to life. However, what is missing in terms of illustration, is a map of Carlton, with the locations of important institutions, including schools, marked on it, as well as the businesses, shops and cafes that are so often mentioned. An index of names would also have helped the reader to cross-reference the different stories. The extensiveness of this wish list underlines the potential of publications of this nature to contribute to history writing by drawing on personal memories before they are lost. The question is how the effort put into such projects can be harnessed so that their outputs are of value not only to a small group of family members, delighted to learn about their past, but to a broader readership drawn from both the Jewish and wider community.

Pam Maclean