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Obituary:

Thoughts on creating worlds through language: an appreciation of Ada Rapoport-Albert by her publisher

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Thoughts on creating worlds through language: an appreciation of Ada Rapoport-Albert by her publisher

CONNIE WEBBER

All historians create worlds through language. Ada was not exceptional in this; what was remarkable was the extent to which the choice of words was important to her. Beginning in the 1990s, I worked with her on three books that she was writing or editing for publication by the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, so I saw this at first hand. I saw it most vividly, however, some years earlier, when I worked with her on a translation project unconnected with Littman. That set the tone for everything that followed, so that is where I want to start my appreciation of Ada.

“The past is a foreign country” is a phrase often used to express a sense of loss or longing for times gone by; but for those whose past was in a foreign country, each day is a reminder of an actual break, a decision that has left them with a split sense of self. The implications of that break are hard to communicate – at least to those who do not share that duality. But for both Ada and for me, it was a lived reality. By the time we met in 1988 she, born and raised in Israel, had been living in England since 1965, but nevertheless regarded herself as an Israeli. I had been born and raised in England but moved to Israel in 1969, and – in complete contrast to Ada – by the time I returned to England in 1986 I had abandoned my original identity as being British and saw myself as an Israeli. We both lived with this duality of identity. Ada and I never discussed our need to unite the two parts of ourselves, the Israeli part and the English part, but looking back now at our first encounter I realize that this yearning was a shared experience. It created a lasting closeness.

Our encounter was not a chance meeting. I was living in Oxford, and it was through Steve Zipperstein, then a Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, that the contact was made. He and Ada were editing a Festschrift for Chimen Abramsky, to be published by Peter Halban as *Jewish History*. They needed translators, I was newly arrived from Israel with experience as a translator, and Steve asked if I could help. Ada must have liked what I did as she subsequently invited me to translate

twenty letters written by the late lamented Joseph Weiss, who had been her doctoral supervisor at University College London (UCL), and to whom she had been very close. The translation was later included as "Joseph Weiss: Letters to Ora" in the landmark volume edited by Ada, *Hasidism Reappraised*, eventually published in 1996 by the Littman Library, of which I was by then the managing editor. But when we worked together on translating those letters in early 1988 I had not yet even heard of the Littman Library.

I sent Ada my translation, and she invited me to her home to discuss it. Sitting with her in her kitchen plunged me back into another world. I re-encountered, for the first time since leaving Israel two years earlier, the world I had left behind, a world of scholarly intimacy in which ideas count and words matter. The very fact of meeting to discuss a work in progress was something I had not done since I arrived in England: I was working as a freelance copy-editor for Oxford University Press, where all contact with authors was done by correspondence. That was rather strange for me after the face-to-face intensity I had experienced as a copy-editor at Tel Aviv University, and with Ada I found the human contact that I had missed. Sitting in her kitchen we explored every nuance of each other's language as we strove to find perfect solutions for a difficult text. For each of us, it was an opportunity to unite the past and the present through the medium of language. "Perfection", for both of us, meant not only accuracy but a text that sounded right and read well. That was the only time that I was to be in Ada's home, but the memory of sitting in her kitchen to work on that translation has stayed with me. It was an experience of minds meeting through an exploration of language – not an unusual experience perhaps, but with Ada the experience was intensified. With Ada everything was intensified.

Unknown to me at that time, my co-operation with Ada was to continue. Late in 1988 I was introduced to Colette Littman, recently widowed, with a view to my solving problems that Oxford University Press, then responsible for publishing the Littman Library, had encountered since Louis Littman's death the previous year. The series had an editorial board, but I was to be brought in as managing editor. Obviously, in my early years with Littman most of the titles that were published had been put under contract by Louis Littman or by the editorial board. *Hasidism Reappraised*, edited by Ada, was among the first titles that I had the pleasure of being involved in from start to finish.

As the lead copy-editor on the volume I worked closely with Ada. I saw her many merits as a volume editor, her high standards in everything, and

above all her willingness to devote herself unstintingly to improving the work of others. Many editors of essay collections see their role as ending, more or less, with the commissioning of the pieces in their volumes, but Ada worked painstakingly to achieve perfection in every contribution in an amazing combination of self-sacrifice and generosity. These efforts and improvements are not, of course, visible in the published volume, except perhaps from a tell-tale phrase in Ada's Preface, where she writes that many of the contributions were "substantially expanded, updated, and elaborated versions" of the papers actually submitted at the conference from which the volume derived. I am sure that many of these revisions were at Ada's prompting. Her generosity extended not only to helping others improve their work, gently insisting on the changes needed, but also to her thanks to everyone involved – some sixteen people, including six people at Littman other than myself, each acknowledged with an elegant mention of their specific contribution. In forty-plus years of editing academic work, I don't think anyone has ever thanked me so profusely for my editorial input, mentioning even my insistence on having "a detailed index . . . and a single comprehensive bibliography – the latter an unusual feature in such a complex, multi-author work, but a contribution that will be of great benefit to those working in the field". Such words of praise were generous not only because they recognized the input of others but also because, in spelling out the Littman Library's contribution beyond its financial commitment, they helped establish its reputation as a world-class publisher. To date, *Hasidism Reappraised* has sold some 1,300 copies, and its inclusion in the Littman e-Library – something which was of course never dreamt of when the book was first published – will make Ada's scholarship available to an ever-widening readership.

Littman's debt to Ada goes beyond the fact that she published with us: through her intellectual generosity, she expanded our reach. Among the authors she brought to us were Rachel Elior, Zeev Gries, Naftali Loewenthal, Gedaliah Nigal, Michal Oron, and Marcin Wodziński – people from different countries and different areas of interest. And she didn't just tell such people to contact us: she took the trouble to explain to them what Littman would give them, and to explain to me why their work was important and why we should be publishing it. I remember in particular how in 1998 she persuaded me that I must meet Rachel Elior, who was in England for a sabbatical. I was reluctant to do so because I knew nothing about Rachel's field, and talking for a couple of hours about a subject of which one knows nothing can be quite a strain. Ada persuaded

me that the effort was worth it, and that I might even enjoy it. It was, and I did – and we have since published three books by Rachel in consequence of Ada's persistence. In reviewing proposals for new titles, she similarly always stressed not only what the book would contribute to the field, but how it would contribute to strengthening Littman's reputation. And she often did this with a light touch and good humour: of one title she memorably said that the work under consideration was not the last word on the subject, "but it was an important first word". We went on to publish that title to considerable acclaim and respectable sales, thanks to Ada's encouragement. She also encouraged us to ensure consistency in the transliteration of Hebrew: the cost of doing so is considerable, so it was important to know that a scholar of Ada's calibre really valued this aspect of our approach to publishing.

Hasidism Reappraised was the first of Ada's books with Littman. We went on to publish two more. *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666–1816* (2011) derived from a text that she had written in Hebrew and which appeared in a volume edited by Rachel Elijor in 2001. As before, she saw the Preface as an opportunity to thank everyone involved. This time she started with the translator, Deborah Greniman: "Her ingenuity in dealing with extensive quotations from difficult seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hebrew texts, themselves replete with quotations from or allusions to biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources, has been truly remarkable." With characteristic modesty she thanked the Littman team as a whole, "whose meticulous care for every detail has spared me, and the reader, any number of errors, inconsistencies, infelicities of style, and the occasional slip into plain gobbledegook". She singles out the copy-editor, Philippa Claiden (actually, her former student at UCL), for her "sharp eye, erudition, and subtle wit", and then thanks every other member of the team individually for their specific contribution. Tellingly, she also acknowledges twenty colleagues by name "for providing key items of information, facilitating access to otherwise inaccessible source materials, or pointing me in directions I had not considered before"; many authors thank colleagues, but few can be bothered to mention the nature of their contribution. Like *Hasidism Reappraised*, this volume met with critical acclaim and has continued to sell – so far 460 copies in hardback and 150 copies in paperback, quite an achievement in the current environment, where sales of 350 copies of an academic book are considered reasonable; an e-book is in the pipeline.

The last of Ada's books to be published by Littman was *Hasidic Studies*:

Essays in History and Gender (2018). It was put under contract in 2015, by which time it was already clear that her health was declining and that every effort must be made to ensure her work was preserved for posterity. The initiative for assembling and publishing the essays came from Shaul Stampfer, himself a Littman author and a longstanding colleague and friend to me and to Ada. Once again, Ada was generous in her thanks to all involved. She thanked Shaul for suggesting the idea, and Moshe Rosman – “yet another Littman author, colleague, and friend” – for having graciously agreed to write “what turned out be a truly humbling introduction to the volume”. Ada was by then not up to writing an introduction herself, which is why Moshe was invited to do so. However, notwithstanding the treatment she was undergoing, she did somehow find the strength to revise her essays where she thought it necessary. This was not something we had envisaged, given her failing health, but Ada remained committed to unstinting accuracy and attention to detail. The result, as she put it, was that “each of the chapters has largely retained its original substance and form while undergoing a certain measure of bibliographical updating and stylistic or, occasionally, substantive modification”. Once again she used the Preface to express her thanks to everyone involved. She thanked the Littman team as a whole for “together creating the most congenial professional environment that any author could wish for”, while complimenting the copy-editor, Agi Erdos, for her “light touch, good sense, and sound judgement”, which, in Ada’s words, turned what she “feared might be a battleground into a wholly pleasurable mutual learning experience”.

One further title in which she was involved – volume 33 of the annual *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Jewish Religious Life in Poland since 1750*, which she co-edited with François Guesnet, Marcin Wodziński, and Antony Polonsky – will be published in January 2021. Another volume that she was contracted to publish with Littman, on a subject that was dear to her heart, was *Female Bodies, Male Souls*; sadly, it will now never see the light of day. It is some consolation that part of the text originally intended for publication there was included in *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi*. Ada was working on so many large projects, while also weighed down by university administration, teaching, and in the last few years also by medical treatment, that some things eventually eluded her grasp. Maybe one day her students will take her work forward.

Ada’s high regard for the Littman team, expressed at every opportunity, was mutual. She was respected by all of us because of her warm

personality, openness, and generosity of spirit. Above all, perhaps, she was respected for her high editorial standards and her willingness to give of herself unstintingly to achieve them, even as her illness threatened to take control. Here are some of my colleagues' comments when the news came that she had died: "She was larger than life, a forthright, strong, and unforgettable person who valued intellectual rigour and clarity highly and was very generous to others." "Ada is unique . . . I am so glad that we all put the effort in to make a good job of *Essays in History and Gender*. It is a great celebration of her work. I hereby forgive her all her footnotes!" "Ada was great company and I really enjoyed copy-editing a Littman book with her . . . fighting tenaciously for what she believed in, in the teeth of all opposition – a quality easier to admire when she was fighting for the rights of her students and department at UCL than some style issue in one of her books . . . But I liked that she cared so passionately about things and I learned an enormous amount from her."

My last contact with Ada took me back to the beginning of my co-operation with her. As managing editor of Littman I nowadays have no time for translating, but occasionally small projects come my way. This March such an opportunity occurred. My husband, Jonathan Webber, had composed the English-language text for a new Holocaust memorial being prepared for a mass grave in a forest about six kilometres south-west of Brzesko (Brigel in Yiddish), which lies some fifty kilometres east of Kraków, and needed to have it in Hebrew too. Who but Ada could produce a translation elegant enough to capture the nuance and pathos of the English he had so carefully crafted? Despite her illness, she gave generously of her time to rise to the challenge, working together with me as she had all those years ago to produce a supremely sensitive text. I include it here in tribute to her memory.

פה טמונים עלומי שם ומוצא
 איש ואשתו עם שני ילדיהם הרכים
 שנרצחו יחדיו עקב יהדותם
 בתש"ד, בימי השואה.
 כאן חיו במחבוא מעל לשנה
 עד שנחשפה זהותם היהודית
 וגורלם נחרץ, כגורל המוני היהודים
 שנספו בפרץ האלים של איבה חסרת-תקדים ופשר
 אשר פקד את רובם ככולם באותם ימים.
 נתפלל לעילוי נשמותיהם
 ולביעור השנאה מן הארץ

Here lie the bodies of a man and his wife
together with their two young children
who were murdered here because they were Jews.
It was in 1944, during the time of the Holocaust.
Their names are not known,
nor where they were from.
They had been in hiding near here for a year or more
but in the end their identity as Jews was discovered
and made public
and their fate became that of so many other Jews
in the incomprehensible tragedy
of hatred and violence that marked those terrible times.
Let us pray for their souls and for an end to such hatred.