

Interview with Lev Raphael

Celebrating Thirty Years of Publishing

Hannah Berliner Fischthal

Lev Raphael has been publishing for over thirty years. He has crafted groundbreaking short stories, memoirs, novels, and literary criticism; additionally, he has written seven academic and Jewish mysteries, as well as important self-help esteem books (with partner, Gershen Kaufman). His work has been translated into nearly a dozen languages; it has been taught at colleges and universities around the country, analyzed in conference papers, academic articles, and books. Raphael was the first Jewish American author to tackle the subject of Second Generation Holocaust trauma. He has spoken at hundreds of venues on three different continents, including the Library of Congress, Oxford University, the 92nd Street Y in New York City, and The Skirball. He left academia in 1988 to write full-time. He has been a reviewer for *The Washington Post*, *Jerusalem Report*, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and the *Boston Review*. He served as a long-time columnist at the *Detroit Free Press*. Raphael also reviewed for several different public radio shows, and he had his own book show where he interviewed Salman Rushdie, Erica Jong, Julian Barnes, and many other authors. His first book, *Dancing on Tisha B'Av*, a collection of brilliant stories incorporating his Jewish and gay identities, received a 1990 Lambda Literary Award. This volume was followed by eighteen others, including *Winter Eyes* (1992); *Journeys & Arrivals* (1996); *The German Money* (2003), a 2004 finalist in Best literary fiction from *Fore-Word Magazine*; *Secret Anniversaries of the Heart: New and Selected Stories* (2006); *Writing a Jewish Life: Memoirs* (2006); and *My Germany: A Jewish Writer Returns to the World His Parents Escaped* (2009), reviewed in this issue of SAJL.

HBF: *Congratulations on your latest successful book, My Germany. You have been publishing fiction and prose about Second Generation Holocaust Survivor experiences for over thirty years, longer than any other American writer. What inspired you to tackle this subject?*

LR: Writers always tell family secrets, and writers always do what their families don't want them to do. In my family, the Holocaust was something that was talked about sparingly, if at all. I think like many survivors, my parents wanted to shield me and my brother from knowledge of the Holocaust, but of course, that made it more pressing and important than it already was in our family. In college, I was very lucky to have a very dedicated creative writing teacher who kept pushing me. She said that I was a talented author, and I would be published some day and win prizes, but my writing wasn't *real*. I didn't know what she meant. I was writing fantasy and things set in Irish pubs, which I'd never been to, but in my senior year I finally opened up to the core material of my life by reading amazing authors like Fitzgerald, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Lawrence Durrell, Edith Wharton, and especially Henry James. The catalyzing moment in my career was reading chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*. That's where Isabel Archer is sitting by the fire thinking about her life, and she realizes that instead of a life of freedom she imagined she'd find by marrying Gilbert Osmond, she's trapped in "the house of dumbness, the house of deafness, the house of suffocation." I read that at 3 a.m. in the morning, and I thought, "That's my house." I saw the opening. I didn't see where I had to go, but I saw where I should head. That's when I wrote something very short, about the war and my parents—a prose poem, really—and that just set me on the path. I knew this was something I had to write about. The door was open.

HBF: *Were you also the first person to write about being Jewish and gay?*

LR: Jewish lesbians led the way, like Evelyn Torton Beck with her 1982 anthology *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Men were slower. I published my first story about children of survivors in 1978 in *Redbook*, but my first gay Jewish story came out in the mid-1980s. I think where my work really stands out is that I was the first male writer who was unequivocally Jewish as well as being gay. That was right there in the title of my first book, *Dancing on Tisha B'Av*. I was out as a Jew; there was no hiding it. It's not as if you could read my book and miss it. I remember when I was on my first or second book tour and people would ask me who were other gay Jewish writers. This was back in the early 1990s. I'd mention people like David Levitt, and they'd say, "Is he Jewish? I didn't know that!" Because it's not really evident in his work. If it's not in the work, maybe it's affecting the work, but that's a different kind of argument to make.

HBF: *You have written in different genres, and you cross genre borders, as, for example, in My Germany. Are you more comfortable with any particular type of writing?*

LR: I love all genres that I've written in, which is why I've written in them, and I'm a happy writer. Writing isn't a torment for me; it's as good as sex and half as messy. I even love revisions, especially if I'm working with a good editor.

I have been reading across genres since I was in second grade. I've always loved history, biography, fiction, you name it. And I like combining them. This new book is a memoir, it's a travelogue, family history, history, mystery. That to me is inter-

esting, to weave different genres together. My last novel, *The German Money*, was a mystery, but it was also a family novel and it was also literary fiction. It's all of them. I'm happy to keep exploring. I'm actually working on a historical novel now and have three books planned in that genre. I love exploring, trying new writers, trying new genres. The mystery series has been special fun for me because they come from my comic side and give me a break from more serious work, and they're a sort of vacation for me, which I hope they can be for readers as well.

HBF: *Can you give me a hint about the historical novels to come?*

LR: The first one will be set in New York City. It's very Jewish in content and set in The Gilded Age. I've been in love with that period of American history since I first read Twain, William Dean Howells, James, and Wharton. I was very glad to be spending time recently in New York for the Jewish Book Network meeting because I got to see how much of Gilded Age New York is still standing, not that I don't love Phillippe Stark's bar at the Hudson Hotel or the Boteros across the street from it!

HBF: *You have both an MFA and a Ph.D. Has your academic training influenced your writing?*

LR: I don't think it's influenced my writing so very directly. I do think that doing an MFA in Creative Writing in English was really important for me because it gave me a giant writer's group for two and a half years, and so I got a lot of support and collegiality from other writers and of course was forced to meet deadlines and *produce*. Also, because almost thirty credits of it were literature courses, I read a lot of authors that I might not have read on my own. In the late 1970s I took a seminar in contemporary British fiction. I don't think I would have ever read Muriel Spark on my own, or Doris Lessing. Alan Sillitoe, Margaret Drabble, Susan Hill, who's a favorite of mine—these are people I discovered in that course. I don't know how much Conrad I would have read on my own, honestly, if I didn't have to read him in that MFA program. Likewise, I don't think I would have read Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Verlaine if I hadn't taken a course in Symbolist poetry, where I discovered Hart Crane, too. All these writers helped my growth—they fed me. And when I did the Ph.D.—because I worked in American studies, in American history and American literature—the main impact was that it really taught me good research habits, and that was very important in writing *My Germany*. I had to follow up every single clue in every direction no matter where it took me—Australia, Paris, Germany, London, Houston, L.A.—I had to be dogged in following things and careful in keeping track of what I had discovered. It's a short book, but I had so much material to base it on, and how else was I going to control that if I didn't know how to maintain some kind of discipline and also persist no matter how many dead ends I reached?

HBF: *Now that you have successfully completed *My Germany*, in which you discuss your mother's Holocaust history, do you feel freer to pursue other subjects?*

LR: Absolutely. I think the book brought me to a place of relative freedom. I may

come back to something Holocaust-related or Second Generation-related, but I don't think I'll do that for a long time. I've said what I needed to say for now and I'm very pleased with where it is. But you can't predict where you'll end up. When I started out, I was only interested in short stories, but look at my travels since.

HBF: *Do you have a favorite book that you've written?*

LR: I have favorite books by other writers. I think *My Germany* is probably the best book I've written, because it's really evoking tremendous responses from people. It seems like every day I get incredible fan mail in my in-box, with people telling me their life stories. Some are children of survivors, some are of German descent and have always been ashamed of being German, thanking me for writing the book. It's really touching people in a deeper way than I expected, but then I don't think that any author sits there and thinks, "I'm going to write this book, and people are going to cry." I think we hope for publicity, we hope for tangible things out in the world, but in terms of the personal, how it's going to affect people, we don't know; so because this book is really touching people a lot, it's my favorite. Plus I love the cover, showing Heidelberg. It's beautiful and evocative.

HBF: *You mentioned favorite books written by others.*

LR: If I had to pick a "desert island book," I would pick Rebecca West's book, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, because it's an enormous book of many genres. It's encyclopedic, part novel in technique, it's history, it's travelogue, it's political science, and it's anthropology and sociology, wrapped in the most gorgeous narration. That's one of the few books I would really want to re-read, a book to spend more time with. And I do have many favorite authors: Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Philip Roth, Alan Furst, Andrew Holleran, James Baldwin, Olivia Manning, Isherwood, Calvino, and Zola, who I've been reading in new translations. There are also lots of historians and biographers I enjoy reading: Antony Beevor, David McCullough, Edmund Morris. There's just not enough time to read them all.

HBF: *What would you like readers to get from reading My Germany?*

LR: I'd like them to think about the journeys made in that book by me and my parents and other people whose paths I cross.

Hannah Berliner Fischthal, St. John's University. This interview was conducted in New York City on May 31, 2009.