



Emanuel Litvinoff interviewed by Patrick Wright

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INTRODUCTION: PATRICK WRIGHT

There are writers for whom it really is worth visiting the library, and Emanuel Litvinoff is one of them. His books are out of print now, but they are the fruit of a remarkable literary life that should not be forgotten. Litvinoff is not the only writer to have emerged into English culture from the Jewish East End, but he is certainly among the most consequential and far reaching.

He first came to notice as a poet during the Second World War, promoted by Herbert Read and John Lehmann. There is a hallucinatory, Kabbalistic quality to his earliest verse, written at a time when he was all but down and out, a sometime habitué of Canetti's expatriate circle in North London, who remembers bumping into Wyndham Lewis and Aleister Crowley as he wandered through Soho.

Some of his most impassioned post-war work was produced as a ghost writer for Louis Golding, a fading Jewish bestseller writer whose soapy characters Litvinoff adopted, and then dragged into his own harder preoccupation with Jewish Palestine and British opposition to the settlement there. In the sixties he became a television dramatist, probing the prejudices of British society.

Litvinoff's tribute to the Jewish East End was published as *Journey Through A Small Planet* in 1972, yet even those of his books that are concerned with much wider matters seem to hover around that tiny, much pressurised world of his childhood. *The Lost Europeans* published in 1960 was about the Jews who returned to Berlin in the years between the Second World War and the erection of the Berlin wall. *The Man Next Door* was a dark comedy about the hatred unleashed on a prosperous Jewish family, who make the mistake of moving out of Whitechapel for the leafy Home Counties. His trilogy, *Faces of Terror*, starts with the 1911 siege of Sydney Street, one of the great moments in the lore of the Jewish East End, and then takes off into a full blown account of the Russian revolution and the rise of Stalinism.

Litvinoff has long combined writing with political campaigning, defending the memory, language and literature of the extinguished Yiddish settlements of East Europe. He is 80 this year (1995), and our conversation began back in the Jewish East End of his childhood; only a stone's throw from the great imperial City of London, but another world all the same.

EMANUEL LITVINOFF:

It was really like a suburb of some East European city like Odessa or Warsaw or Kharkov, and so on, because people still spoke the languages of Eastern Europe; Yiddish and Russian, and Polish, and the food was the same kind of food as they had eaten for generations there. The music, the culture, was entirely East European Jewish.

PW:

And a sense, presumably, of memory. I mean, everyone must have been somewhere else...

EL:

Well yes, they talked about events in Eastern Europe as though they were happening really next door; they were very much involved in that. Hardly at all involved in what was going on in the larger English society that was around us. When they read the papers they used to buy the famous Yiddish paper *Die Zeit*, which incidentally they would pass from one to another. The first person bought it I think for tuppence, the next person got it to read for three ha'pence, but that's where they got their news from, and it was usually news of pogroms, disasters and anti-Semitism. My family came from Odessa, and the neighbourhood of Odessa, and there was this vast migration of Jews from the Russian empire which started in the 1890s on a very large scale, and continued until the break out of the First World War. And my family came over towards the end of that particular period.

PW:

Aiming for America like so many...

EL:

They wanted to go to America, in fact I understood from my mother that they thought they were going to America, and then they were put ashore in London because they were told that they hadn't paid enough money.

PW:

When you wrote your autobiography your father was an absent figure, you describe him very movingly as an unwelcoming chest with a watch chain across it. He went back it seems, is that correct?

EL:

Well in March 1917 when they had the Kerensky revolution, there was an agreement made between the Kerensky government and the British government that Russian nationals would either go and serve in the British army, or they would have to go back to Russia to serve in the army, and like a lot of other Russian Jews in East London my father chose to go back, probably thinking that by the time they got back, the war might be over, because by 1917 everybody knew how dreadful it was on the Western Front. And then he disappeared...

PW:

...last seen travelling north or something?

EL:

Well he was part of a group of Jews from East London who banded together in the anarchy and the chaos and the violence that existed then in the early revolutionary Russia, to make their way up to Archangel and get a ship back to England. And apparently they did, they were curious kind of, I understand they minted their own money, oh, I don't know, they stole horses, they did all sorts of things, very adventurous journey it must have been. And then they had to disperse – it was illegal what they were doing – so they had to convene again at a certain time, probably early dawn, or before dawn, and get aboard ship and go off. And my father must have overslept or something, because when they'd waited and he hadn't turned up, on their way out they saw him waving from the shore.

PW:

Just left behind, stranded, and that was the last sighting of him?

EL:

Left behind, yes.

PW:

You grew up in a very small, enclosed world, I mean this Jewish part of London was a few streets really, we're talking a very compact world.

EL:

Well I would say it was a square mile or so, it was not more than a few streets, it was, yes, undoubtedly like a small town on its own.

PW:

And it was full of great poverty and great romanticism and great extreme politics as well. I mean, you write about it in terms of people forming committees in their back rooms...

EL:

It had undoubtedly, an extraordinary, throbbing vitality, because, you know, they were an extraordinary lot of people of all different kinds. Most people were preoccupied with politics or religion; devout Jews were not interested in politics except of course for as it were some kind of Zionism. And then there were the communists and the socialists, and tremendous arguments used to go on in the tea shops like Goides' famous tea shop in the Whitechapel Road where the intellectuals used to meet and argue passionately over a glass of lemon tea: the merits of Zionism versus Communism, and Communism versus much easier socialism, much gentler kind of socialism, revolution or not revolution...

PW:

So how did you come to be a writer out of this background?

EL:

For a very simple reason, idiotic really, when I was in the infant school I broke my arm, and my teacher allowed me to sit in front of the class and write a composition while she went on teaching the rest of the children. I wrote this composition about the Ancient Britons, and she read it out to the class, and I basked in this extraordinary moment of fame and celebrity and from that moment on I knew I was going to be a writer.

PW:

Your schooling was in the area...

EL:

Yes I left school at fourteen because I kept failing the scholarship you see, and I went to a trade school for a while, called Cordwainers Technical College, which turned out to be a place where you learned to make boots and shoes. And then I wanted to go to the school of printing because I thought that had something to do with writing, but I think they turned me down because I was Jewish, and so I left just before my fourteenth birthday, and went into the fur trade, got a job as a sort of general errand boy, runner around.

PW:

And you started writing from that sort of basis?

EL:

No, I started writing suddenly when I was about fifteen and a half, sixteen, I was working in a furniture factory and I remember I was mixing some glue, and some lines of a poem came to me, and I scribbled them down, put them in my pocket, and I always remember the first two lines, I can't remember the rest of it: "Farewell O Queen of the Night, Dark Mistress of my Cosmic Dreams" and I didn't know where the hell it came from...

PW:
and you were off!

EL:
I was off from then on!

PW:
but this is not what you might call an English poet, you were dealing with all sorts of...

EL:
No, I didn't know anything about poetry, I mean we learned Shakespeare by heart at school, and we learned things like 'The Highwayman'.

PW:
The first poems of yours that I read, I found them in a small, old copy in the British Library, which are full of Kabbalistic implications, not exactly hallucinatory, but they seem to come from an exalted and slightly frantic and desperate state of mind perhaps, and one thinks of great aspiration and also hard times on the street.

EL:
Well the reason I was writing poems like that was because I got hooked on the occult, I had been a young Communist, and a couple of people I had met, a woman and a man, destroyed Communism for me. They were occultists you see, and I went through a period of total depression, when I really had some kind of a nervous breakdown, because Communism was something to hold onto, as a possibility for the future; if you lost your Communism, then the future held out no hope at all. And then I got hooked on occultism, and I was trying to enter past lives...

PW:
And this happened, we're talking about the thirties again, before the Second World War?

EL:
Yes, that's right.

PW:
And by then you had started wandering into places like Soho if I remember the books right, you're further afield than Whitechapel.

EL:
I wandered into Soho when I was down and out for a while, and Soho was the kind of place where a café would stay open until three o'clock in the morning, and you might be able to sit in a corner and be unnoticed and keep warm. So I used to go there and sit around, and sometimes somebody bought me a cup of tea or something like that. Anyway there were arguments going on, violent arguments of all kinds. It was an interesting place, it was also intellectually a kind of hothouse, because it attracted as it were, people who were called bohemians. Some of them were writing poetry or other things, there were people who were painting, people who were doing all sorts of things.

PW:
Now somewhere along the line, you met up with people like Canetti.

EL:

That was at the beginning of the war. By then I had written an enormous novel which of course nobody wanted to publish, and I had also written a shorter novel which I have absolutely no recollection of, and also nobody wanted to publish, and I was waiting to go into the army actually.

PW:

And were these books looking back into the East End?

EL:

Yes, the very long novel I wrote, which was called *Oh Time Wearied*, because at that time I was very much influenced by a book called *Of Time and the River*, by Thomas Wolfe, a very interesting American writer. It must have been at least half as long as the bible, an awfully pedestrian account of every moment I could remember of growing up in the East End.

PW:

And it did not survive the severity of your own self-judgement?

EL:

I actually burned it when I came out of the army.

PW:

You once gave a talk in Israel which I remember reading the text of, in which you described leaving the Jewish East End in a manner that I thought was extremely interesting, because you describe how in a way this was a community that people wanted to get out of just as quickly as they could. You also described how a sort of feeling of loathing developed, and that was how people made the transition, they had turned their backs on it and they hated the chapped arms of the herring women in the markets...

EL:

Well I don't know whether everybody did but to me it seemed a small, parochial world which had become fusty and old fashioned and superstitious, and I used to be alienated by the fact that they would have the names of shops sometimes in Hebrew letters, and also the strange names, all the names were -inskys or -offs, like my own name, Litvinoff. For a short while I changed my name actually, I called myself 'Len H Lee!'. The feeling was you had to get away from the East End otherwise somehow or other you were doomed to a life of sweatshop labour and poverty and also a kind of narrow-minded parochial society, which it wasn't actually but that was how it seemed to us.

PW:

The war was a major feature in the transition for you, I mean, you went off into the army and came back into another world.

EL:

I went off into the army and came back a different person too, entirely. I was in the army for five and a half years, and grew up I suppose, I came out married, I had a child, I was writing more sophisticated poetry, I was getting published, I was reviewing books in things like *Tribune* and other journals, fringe journals I suppose they were.

PW:

And no longer in that part of London, no longer in the East End.

EL:

No I didn't have really any links with the East End, I didn't see much of my family, I had a large family and we were not very close, and I was living in Hampstead and I was meeting other people who were writing, and acting, and doing all sorts of things like that.

PW:

And then after that you became quite prodigious, I mean you were making your living with your pen, but much of your work was not published under your own name – you were a ghostwriter, yes?

EL:

I did a certain amount of ghostwriting for a man named Louis Golding. I wrote one whole novel for him, a book of stories about bare-knuckle fighters, I think I wrote another novel for him, but I just can't remember that, I have no recollection of what it was about even, except that I saw that it was posthumously published some years - not very long ago, and I suddenly realised that I had written it.

PW:

There's one called *To the Quayside*...

EL:

To the Quayside was a kind of major novel in fact because I had to research the Holocaust and the Warsaw ghetto. I think that became very much my novel, Louis was rather worried about the style, and he had to mess around with it to make it more of a Louis Golding novel than it was.

PW:

Something happens in the war, which is obviously the Holocaust, that really seems to be a major impulse in your work, or a lot of your work from that point on.

EL:

Yes, it was, it hit me particularly over the sinking of a vessel called the Struma, that was a very sort of leaky old tub in which some 600 Jews, men women and children, had managed to get aboard from Rumania and were making their escape from the fortress of Hitler Europe with all that was going on there, and they wanted to go to Palestine. They arrived in Turkey off Istanbul, and the ship was in a bad way and they were refused either permission to go on to Palestine, or to disembark and make their way overland to Palestine.

PW:

Now who refused them exactly?

EL:

The British colonial officials were putting pressure on the Turks not to allow these people to carry on their journey. In the end, the ship was towed out of harbour, and then it sank and apparently there was only one survivor, somebody survived, and eventually ended up in Japan I think. And this was for me a powerful grief, that here were these people escaping from the hideous death that confronted them in the Nazi occupied Europe, and they were not allowed into Palestine because they did not have the certificates to get in, and I wrote a very bitter and in many ways inarticulate poem called Struma, and from that moment, the curious thing was I stopped being an Englishman, I became in a sense, a European Jew. And it didn't pass that feeling I had, so I never was able to feel myself an Englishman or particularly even

an English Jew, I just felt a Jew and that somehow or other my emotional roots were in Eastern Europe.

PW:

And when you looked at English culture after this experience, after this complete disaster, you looked and you saw TS Eliot and the impact of the Second World War and the Holocaust must have seemed slight when you considered TS Eliot's poem. You had an intersection, an argument, with him didn't you?

EL:

Well what happened was I was a tremendous admirer of Eliot, I loved his poems

PW:

from the thirties?

EL:

Yes, but I didn't read him in the thirties, I didn't read him until I was in the army, because I didn't start reading modern poetry until I was in the army. I absolutely thought he was the most wonderful poet. And I was coming home from work one day and I picked up a book that had just been published in Penguin of his *Selected Poems*.

When I started to read though there were poems I hadn't seen, some of his early poems, there were these appallingly anti-Semitic poems, that read to me like *Der Stürmer*, the Nazi newspaper, and I thought to myself, how on earth could he publish it after Auschwitz in his *Selected Poems*? I was so angry and injured by this, particularly as I admired him so much, that when I got home I went straight to the desk and I wrote a poem in a fever of feeling, just called 'To TS Eliot'.

It was a very bitter and angry poem, and it so happened that a week or so later I was invited to read poems at the Institute of Contemporary Art that was having its very first poetry platform, and when my turn came to read, I was on the platform and Herbert Read had announced me, and then I announced the poem to TS Eliot, and then he said 'oh good Tom's just come in'. Eliot had arrived with an entourage, and I felt very nervous, in fact I almost felt like chickening out, but then I decided that the poem had its right to be read and I read it. And it caused shock and outrage almost universally in that room – I was attacked by several well-known poets, and Herbert Read said to me "if I had known that you were to read such a poem, Eliot is a dear friend of mine, I would never have allowed it." And I thought at the time, "you're an anarchist, you've accepted a knighthood, and yet you would repress me for reading this particular poem". And that was that, I went back to my seat, my wife was there, and some friends of mine were there, and I thought that I mustn't exit too hastily because it would be cowardly. So I waited for a certain amount of other poems to be read by other people, and then I decided we'd better go. As I was leaving with my wife who was a very beautiful girl, one of Eliot's entourage said indignantly "he's with a beautiful girl!".

PW:

Now I'm intrigued by this partly because in this period, the fifties, after the war, when the Cold War is settling in, you in a sense seem to turn back towards the Jewish tradition. You don't go back to Whitechapel or the Jewish East End because it doesn't any longer exist, but you do become greatly interested in the Yiddish world of East Europe, the largely extinguished Yiddish world one has to say by this time.

EL:

Well partly because to earn a living (as I certainly was not earning a living by writing poetry or the odd article and things like that), I was working for a weekly Jewish magazine called the *Jewish Observer*, but then in 1956, my then wife, Cherry Marshall, who ran a very well known model agency, was invited to take the first western fashion show to Moscow, and I went along, and...

PW:

This is an extraordinary event then, the first western fashion show!

EL:

That's right, it was an extraordinary event for more than one reason, because I had been asked to take a letter from the then president of the Zionist Federation to the Chief Rabbi in Moscow, because the president wanted to be invited to go to the Soviet Union and visit the Jewish community there. I had great difficulty reaching the Chief Rabbi, everybody tried to block my way, all the official interpreters and the other officials tried to persuade me against it. Eventually I managed to go there, and I walked into the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union, which was heart rending. The street outside the synagogue was full of people in rags, many of them with their feet bound in rags, and they had all been recently freed from prison camps, they had nowhere to go, no future, and I began to hear the most terrifying stories about Soviet anti-Semitism. So I came back with this extraordinary feeling, a sense of guilt really, because I did think that not enough had been done in the thirties, one should have done more to waken public opinion, and to try and mobilise political pressure on the Nazis, so I really felt that something ought to be done about Soviet Jews, and I started a newsletter.

PW:

So when you came back you became a campaigner in a sense.

EL:

Yes I started the world campaign for Soviet Jews. I wasn't the only person concerned, but I was the only person to be able to publicise it. And so I produced this publication called *Jews in Eastern Europe*, and gradually we began to build up tremendous pressure of public opinion. Over the years it became an extraordinarily successful campaign.

PW:

I imagine that to begin with this was hardly an issue that people on either side of the political spectrum wanted to take on.

EL:

Well, I was accused of being a 'Cold Warrior', not only by Communists but by middle of the road socialists, members of the Labour Party. Nobody on the Left wanted to touch it, and I would not touch anybody on the Right because I didn't want it to become an anti-Communist tool.

PW:

It must have become an almost full time occupation.

EL:

Well it became an obsession with me. And of course as we started to get more and more results it became more exciting, because in the end we were able to prepare the ground for a large emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union.

PW:

I'm interested in the fact that you had arguments in Israel, I've read things in the Jewish press in the 60s where you were actually going into Israel and saying look, I'm not buying this idea that the state of Israel should be seen as abolishing the emigration, should be seen as abolishing the Yiddish world.

EL:

I was not a political Zionist. For me, the reason I cared about Israel was because Israel was the one country which took the refugees, the survivors of the holocaust. Nobody else would take them, and so for me it was the country of the survivors. And I was one of a group of Anglo-Jewish writers who were having a series of meetings with Israeli writers in Israel in 1966, just before the six-day war. And I found myself arguing against a kind of Zionist chauvinism, and I didn't like it. And this led to me writing a very long piece which you've probably read in a Jewish magazine...

PW:

It was in the *Jewish Quarterly* I think...

EL:

In the *Jewish Quarterly*, yes, which was called 'A Jew In England' about my upbringing, and how I felt about Israel when it came into existence, and why I decided that I belonged where my language was, rather than where my national roots were!

PW:

But it's hard particularly for non-Jewish people to realise now the passion with which advocates of the new state also advocated Hebrew as a language that was in every way superior and more independent than this wonderful thing called Yiddish.

EL:

Yes I think they were right actually because Yiddish was totally associated with what was a period in Jewish history that had been brought bloodily and dreadfully to an end. But of course they didn't only prefer Hebrew, many of them polemicized against Yiddish. It seemed to me to be stupid to ignore the fact that Yiddish had a wonderful culture, a wonderful literature, which of course nowadays is fully recognised in Israel.

PW:

You came from it, you left it: where does the East End remain in your writing as you look back over it now?

EL:

It's a kind of myth in a way. In a sense as I've grown older and older I've had a curious feeling of having been an onlooker rather than an inhabitant of my own life, and it's as an onlooker of a child who grew into adolescence and early manhood in the East End, a child named Emanuel Litvinoff, that I think about it. But as far as I'm concerned, it has that kind of mythic quality.

PW:

Do you feel ignored now? I mean, it's a long time ago some of this work you've done, do you feel that your presence was registered in the English setting?

EL:

I doubt it, I have no sensation, I think most people have never heard of me. I had, I think, very little impact. Where I had a major impact, and for which I'm very pleased, I think it has

justified my existence, is the campaign I started in 1956 to bring world pressure to bear on the problem of anti-Semitism of Jews in the Soviet Union; one of the most successful campaigns I think that has been waged in the west on behalf of a persecuted minority.

PW:

One of the books that I think must stand, I mean has to have a future life if anything does, is your portrait of the Jewish East End, *Journey Through A Small Planet*, which you wrote quite recently really, I mean you wrote it in the 70s, a long time having left.

EL:

As far as I'm concerned it's the book I've written that I personally like best.

PW:

And it is probably one of the main records now.

EL:

Yes I think it has a future, I think that book could well be read in a hundred years time, which I doubt will be the fate of my other books, I don't know. Who can tell!

PW:

Does that worry you, that the others won't be?

EL:

Not at all, not at all. Somehow or other all the vanity that I had, like everybody else, has been shaken out of me by life and circumstances. I really don't give it a thought.

PW:

Well Emanuel, thank you very much for coming in and talking so freely with us.

EL:

It's a pleasure.

END

Transcribed by Aaron Litvinoff




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