

A WISE CHILD

A narrative

by Michael Picardie

"My mother," answered Telemachus, "tells me I am son to Ulysses, but it is a wise child that knows his own father" – from the Odyssey translated by Samuel Butler 1900.

LAZARUS

My father was originally called Lazar, a name found amongst European Christians and Jews and derives from the Hebrew אֵלְעָזָר (El'azar or Eleazar), meaning "God has helped".

He always associated his Polish-Lithuanian origins with his deceased grandmother and his three great-aunts who helped his mother Fayga Pekarsky at his birth in an obscure Polish village. If they had lived long enough Rytse, Chaiste and Froomste (née Gröenblatt) would have died in the Holocaust in their 80's.

In my experience my father was consciously unworried by, and denied the significance of the Holocaust because he believed that the dead live on, and, besides his assumption was that Jews were or should behave like Jewish Christians following Jesus' doctrine of loving the neighbour – in my father's opinion all neighbours irrespective of how anti-Semites behaved towards Jews.

But how could Jews do this in their traditional East European roles as bailiffs, and tax-collectors, being blocked from the medieval guilds, enduring quotas in entering the professions, prevented from becoming landowners?

They should have "got out in time anyway" presuming that Hitlerism was on the horizon for all to see. I had the intuition that he meant they should have become Christians, abandoned a religion nearly four thousand years old. But didn't Jerusalem rank with ancient Athens and ancient Rome as the very centres of classical Western cultures and traditions, despite fascism, Nazism, colonialism, the slave trade?

Certainly, Hitler had already signalled his genocidal intentions with the publication of *Mein Kampf* in the mid-1920s.

It was enough to turn me into a radical, but one afraid of the fate in store for Jews who defied the South African segregationalist order. We were treated as privileged whites. We were educated. Our modern Jewish religion had its own Enlightenment, what Moses Mendelssohn called the *Haskalah*.

Didn't modernism urge us to resist oppression by peaceful means especially through education into the co-existence of religions and the use of non-violent passive resistance, *satyagraha*, as Gandhi and his followers had deployed in their struggle with the British in India?

My father tried to be a quiet apostle of Christ. He was named after the most famous dead man in the Christian bible, Lazar, who lived again – Lazarus - the man Christ raised from the dead. Could there be any help from God greater than this, even if it was a legend? There could have been a core of truth in it, at least for Christians if not for Jews who had in the medieval period been killed in Christ's name, the very opposite of being raised from the dead.

So, what is mysterious to me is why Jews like my paternal grandparents should have given their first-born offspring such a Christian name – as it appears to us now. Perhaps it was a defence against all the anti-Semitic hostility faced in their circumstances. Perhaps at the time they thought of Lazar as derived from Eleazar - a Hebrew name, which it was. But without the "El" prefix, indicating "God" it was just a common name in Eastern Europe.

My forefathers didn't read the Christian bible. My father did, avidly. He embraced the Christian Lazarus in the Christian bible. He would be sceptical of my scepticism that Lazarus could have suffered from an epileptic stupor or a stroke from which took some time to recover or catatonia. Perhaps Jesus imagined this possibility from the symptoms reported to him. He was by then an experienced faith-healer with probably a good knowledge of medical signs. He was also related to Lazarus through his mother Mary and wept when told of this Lazarus' "death". Could he have sent word to Bethany and then travelled to this village to be with Lazarus in his tomb, and as a healer known how to search for his pulse, massaged him, gave him the kiss of life until he came to, asked his followers to unbind Lazarus from his wrappings and filled him with the will to go on living in Bethany?

Perhaps this is a modern reading of what, in the first place could have been a parable, legend or myth but is recorded as fact in the gospel of St. John. In other words, Lazarus was not, initially, dead at all. The story could have been an intentional fiction.

As well this Lazarus was conflated with another Lazarus who through a process of association is identified with leprosy. We know that a "lazar-house" came to mean a leper-colony. He too was miraculously transformed but after death.

So, in the Christian bible there are two characters named Lazarus: a poor beggar whose sores (called generically "leprosy") were licked by dogs and who after death found himself in "Abraham's bosom" whilst *Dives* (Latin for "rich man"), his moral opposite begged to be released from Limbo or Hell: suffering can teach us moral virtue by producing pity and empathy and therefore generosity or charity, whereas wealth (*dives*) producing luxury, can diminish kindness and love, can even be a limbo, a hell on earth.

The more famous Lazarus goes on to become a missionary for Jesus and lives for another four years. Fictionally or really.

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It took me a lifetime to understand how to fathom my father and now I write about him as if, in memory, he is alive in 2021, 28 years after his physical departure from the world and his entry into "death". As long as I am alive he exists in a spiritual sense.... Like the legends of the revived Lazarus, and the poor Lazarus with sores like leprosy "in Abraham's bosom."

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My father was a memorable teacher who loved eternal truths as he saw them in astronomy, Greek mythology and above all the Jewish Jesus. It goes without saying that for many Jews Jesus – *Yeshua* – was tainted. He was glorified out of all recognition as a Jewish holy man. For most Jews, Christian

transformation of this Galilean healer into the actual only-begotten Son of God, born of a Virgin, and whose execution was blamed on the high priest of the Jewish temple who, as the gospels say, wanted Jesus killed because guilty of blasphemy and sedition – all this was part of an anti-Semitic stereotype. Hence scapegoating of Jews in the name of God and Jesus for ideological and social and economic purposes. Because the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children until the third and fourth generation? But there were scores of generations between the death of Jesus and the Holocaust. Nevertheless, persecution and hatred of Jews (now Israelis as such) has never ceased.

Associated with this legend or partial reality of Jesus there are 2000 years of justification for anti-Semitic persecution, although the historical Jesus was and remained a Jew preaching to Jews to return to the law of Moses. As for the Jews, they were, for the most part, already keeping the law of Moses. But it was a double-bind. If they remained Jews they denied Christ, if they conformed outwardly to Christian norms they were still unredeemed since the Jew is seen to be like Judas, is a betrayer, a hypocrite. Christians even the gospel writers mistakenly translate Pharisees as hypocrites, whereas they were historically a rabbinical group devoted to commentary on the *Torah*. The Sadducees were the wealthy, hereditary priesthood who rejected rabbinical commentary.

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I think of my father as someone entitled to be shown the respect of which he was cheated towards the end of his life when everything he and my mother had worked for at the material level was unwittingly signed away by my gullible father to a fraudster leaving him with only a constantly devaluing teacher's pension subject to inflation. He denied the ultimate completeness of death like the more famous Lazarus, but accepted relative poverty and was stigmatised as if he had leprosy like the other Lazarus. The beneficiary of his poverty, the fraudster, certainly became like *Dives* a rich man, but didn't enter any kind of Limbo or Hell as far as I know.

I fear that unwittingly, he was signing away the material life in favour of the spiritual life his hero Jesus advocated. His whole family warned him never to go near business transactions.

That is what South Africa was like, and remains the same in the post-apartheid South Africa: a heavily criminalised society. It puts the liberal in a bind, feeling guilty about abandoning the "liberation struggle" for which so many would-be guerrillas and militants died or suffered. For what? I write as someone car-jacked by armed criminals in January 2000 after spending much of the previous decade setting up and running a multi-racial pre-school in the cottage next to Temple Israel in Paul Nel and Quartz Streets in the dangerous district of Hillbrow near the inner city of Johannesburg, the economic and financial capital of Southern Africa. Was my pre-school just a guilty gesture? Why didn't I stay after the car-jack?

The pre-school survives and now has an African organiser.

So all was not lost. It was enough agony seeing my father trapped in this treacherous society.

God alone knows how a normally intelligent man, only in his early old age, still intellectually competent, who looked to me his only child to help him, could have done this self-destructive thing, when, for as long as I can remember, he was advised to keep away from business matters.

For me, this has to do with the very human contradiction at the heart of a South Africa which remains only less wicked in the post-apartheid era, but by no means good - still corrupt in its proliferation of crime and violence suffered as much by the African “masses” as by the white minority, even though the Africans and other “non-Europeans” now have the vote, and determine the government of the day and in theory are in charge of their destinies through a multi-ethnic and multi-party parliament.¹ My scare-quotes indicate how both Marxist clichés and white-supremacist negatives can dominate discourse.

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My father shared the problem of Jews who wanted to fit into countries to which they migrated: he did not want to appear too Jewish for fear of anti-Semitic prejudice and discrimination. However, if he had only stuck with our people he would never have fallen for a large-scale fraud, from which my late mother’s middle sister, Anne, a hard-headed and practical woman, would have protected him. She offered to share her flat with him after my mother’s death in 1969. Her husband Jerry was a companionable, humorous man, learned in Jewish studies and a talented musical composer, financially absolutely straight and capable of sussing out fraud by showing legal documents to attorney friends of the family.

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The story of my father’s surname which I and my two daughters Justine and the late Ruth Picardie inherited is a narrative of Jewish assimilation into a quasi-Christian world. He originally had his father’s surname Pekarsky but this Polish or Russian name he changed to Picardie when he won a bardic chair for his poetry at an Eisteddfod in 1922 – poetry written not in Welsh in Wales but in English in Johannesburg where there was a Welsh community of immigrant gold-mining engineers and skilled gold miners supervising underpaid African and originally non-unionised mining labourers.

Of the historic horrors of *economic colonialism* there was no mention in my father’s -poetry, but rather a contrary depiction of Africans as victims of their *ancestral spirit religion* in a poem about the famous sacrificial Xhosa cattle killing of the mid-19th century when a young girl heard and saw traditionally revered ghosts of this tribal nation order this terrible, tragic act of self-victimisation which *did not* lead to the resurrection of the slaughtered cattle and the warriors of old. The prophecy was an apocalyptic *delusion*. It was prophesied that the

¹ See R.W.Johnson (2010) *South Africa’s Brave New World – The Beloved Country After Apartheid*, London: Penguin.

ancestors would rise again to restore the land alienated by white settlers, back to the Xhosa people. The cattle too would be resurrected. Instead hundreds of thousands of Xhosa people died of starvation. One needed a theory of divergent *class and ethnic interests and the pretence of a "civilizational" struggle* to explain South African history.²

What a romantic he was. As a young lad from 1914-1918, he may have heard a soldiers' song popular in the music halls and sung to keep their spirits up fighting in the Great War - "Roses of Picardie". This sentimental ballad was adopted by the troops to associate themselves with enchanted nights in the Picardy or Picardie district of Normandy away from the terrible reality of the trenches. The song has the line - "roses are blooming in Picardie - by the light of the silvery moon". The incomparable rose of Picardie, is of course, epitomised by a lovely French girl.

Without disrespecting my sweet and gentle father, surely the Jewish God, or as Heidegger puts it, Being which is housed in language, would want to spare us these clichés and the sheer incongruity and suffering of many of the originally poor Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland fighting Germany in the Great War but whose relatives stayed behind who welcomed the Germans in Imperial Russian territories at that stage in history as being less oppressive than the Tsarist regime. That was a measure of Jewish misery in the fantastic, romanticised *shtetl* depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

All this was of course before Hitler and the Nazis. I repeatedly asked my father about Jesus and the Holocaust. He replied: "They (the Jews) could have got out in time." He expressed no sympathy, no understanding of the pseudo-Christian nature of the anti-Semitic myth and the dubious role of the German churches and Pope Pius.

So, it was if he was almost blaming the Jews for not being Christians. Once visiting him in his hotel for impoverished whites which I shall call the Lourenco Marques Hotel in Pietersen Street in Hillbrow, I found him lying on his bed, weeping over a meditative image he said he saw, of Jesus crucified. I tried to say it gently: "Do you not see, Dad, this guilt is what some Christians want you, a Jew to feel? Don't you see the Holocaust itself is based on this lie of Jewish guilt?".

Orthodox Jewish religion would totally taboo any mention of a romance with a Catholic girl in the Picardie area of Normandy. My father was caught up in these contradictions and he chose this paradoxical surname. He even had a book in his bookcase - a bound polemic comparing the Jews to chameleons - who had only survived as a religious and secular group by blending into their gentile

² 34 African platinum miners at the Rustenberg Marikana mine, were killed by the South African Police Service(SAPS) on 16 August 2012, and this was the most lethal use of force by South African security forces using firearms against civilians since 1976. The massacre has been compared to the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, except that it was committed by African police under an African commander against miners protesting against poor housing and other material conditions when the official A.N.C. government controlled N.U.M. did nothing about so as to represent the miners. Their angry resistance was focussed on forming a more representative union to replace supine local trade union officials seen as government agents. Reportedly they had no firearms only sticks.

surroundings – implicitly with no integrity of their own and therefore a danger to Christians always enacting some disguise, inherently untrustworthy.

I was given the name Mordechai ben Eliezer (or Eleazer) at my circumcision. In everything she did, my mother transmitted to me a code of honour in conformity with the ten commandments. She ignored my father's constant nagging away about his misery caused by having to teach badly behaved white children. There was always their block of flats, which I call Observatory Mansions, their security for a prosperous old age.

He threw it away.

Perhaps he was in imagination the Lazarus who was poor and covered with the sores of humiliation even though his pupils were being taught with rich insight by him, an Eisteddfod bard, a sensitive teacher teased and mocked by his pupils who could not or would not take to English literature generally.

Like the more famous Lazarus he *hoped* he would arise through Christian Science from the threat of death. He needs to be commemorated as a pilgrim seeking after personal and metaphysical truth.

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My mother was a proudly Jewish Minny (Miryam Europeanised?) Sacks from Vilnius a city initially in Poland then in Lithuania when the borders were redrawn. Originally their surname must have been the medieval and modern German "Sachs" meaning "things" or "business matters."

My maternal grandfather Philip Sacks was good with figures and became a book-keeper, so honest that my maternal grandmother Rose Sacks (née Oshry) berated him as "too honest".

What would she have wanted him to do to get rich in notorious Johannesburg? Cook the books? And then what? Risk going to prison? I imagine he would put it to his clients that they owed certain amounts to the Inland Revenue, and refused to be paid off to keep quiet about it, but said no more. Perhaps this dire warning was enough to keep them honest.

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In keeping with God-given laws, 8 days after my birth which was on the 13th August 1936 at the Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital, Siemert Road, Doornfontein, I must have been initiated into the covenant of Abraham by a doctor or circumcising expert, a *mohel*. This would have entailed a religious ceremony naming me and my father in Hebrew exactly in accordance with the Jewish *Torah* or law. My Jewish identity would become part of my essence, really the essence of my existence since identity is existential in that it changes interactively but retains a core of truth - an integrity of truth, in Greek *Alethia* in Hebrew "*emet*".

Of course, not all human identities are based on truth, moral truth. The fraudster named himself but of what worth was this name? He disgraced everyone named with this name just as *Dives* disgraced wealth (*dives*).

My father, on the other hand in the course of time was so caught up in the contradictions of being a sort of Jewish Christian, that he ignored Jesus' example which was to bring *Jews* (like himself) back into observing the law of Moses and the injunction to *Jews* in Leviticus to love the *Jewish* neighbour. Why did he have dealings with a person unknown to our community? This is not to say there are no "*ganovim*" - thieves - in every community. A child knows or should know that anyone can be a *gannif*.

It was Paul and the foundation of a church which universalised Jesus as the one and only Son of God, the originator of a new religion. Why did he have dealings with a person belonging to a community known for the unchristian brutality of millions of its members in keeping South Africa a white dictatorship?

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So, because I was two months premature and only 5 pounds in weight, and my mother Minny Sacks had lost a child which was stillborn a couple of years earlier, both of us had to be watched medically and I cannot be sure of when I was circumcised.

I am guessing that my circumcision *probably* took place on 21 August (the 8th day after birth) also at the Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital, Siemert Road, Doornfontein. My mother didn't discuss such intimate matters frankly and openly. She wept when I told her at puberty that my father had told me the facts of life. Perhaps it was grief that she was losing an *innocent* child, not a sense of shame about procreation.

So, my father was a poet earning an exacting living as a school teacher. There was a gap, an *anomie* between my anxious, very conservative but essentially competent pianist / building-entrepreneur mother who overcame her fears. But my father had to teach white schoolboys who were overprivileged and, essentially, bullied him into states of recurrent depression.

When he was depressed, Jesus and Christian Science were his sources of help. I often wondered: was it a love match between Louis and Minny? He was very kind to her when she became crippled with a viral form of arthritis and died of a stroke in December 1969.

It may have been an arranged marriage. He sometimes acted as if he was trapped in school-teaching and she wouldn't let him become a Christian Science practitioner because she needed his regular monthly salary to pay off the bond (the mortgage) to the Permanent Building Society.

My father occasionally charged around the flat banging pupils' exercise books in angry piles about the dining room table in our flat in Observatory Mansions. Once a grim-faced parent came to our flat to reprimand him for caning his boy at Yeoville Boys Primary School. The brutality of South Africa pervaded every crack and crevice of this society. But brutalisation did happen everywhere in the

British Empire. It was taken to be normal in the British public school. Was the battle of Waterloo won on the playing-fields of Eton? Not by the common soldiers who fought and died as heroically as their officers?

So, Observatory Mansions is the name I shall give the real block of 12 flats which dominated our lives. I need now to observe my life there and the lives of the others in that locale to give me *catharsis* – the outpouring of fear and pity to give me the courage to go on. And yet I had a privileged upbringing compared to the millions of black South Africans used as units of labour without the rights guaranteed in the 1993/4 constitution on which post-apartheid South Africa was founded by diplomatic negotiation.

I picture my mother quietly practising the piano, giving piano lessons and writing out tenants' rent and electricity bills. She had been to the Royal Academy of Music in Euston Road, London, in the 1920s but at her final exam/performance her anxiety was such that her pedal-work went wrong and she vowed never to play in public again. According to my aunt Anne my father "threw away" (the real market value) of my mother's Steinway when he got into financial difficulties when the *ganiff* ripped him off. This from the sister-in-law who offered him a home as a widower.

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But, in accordance with an age-old tradition my circumcision took place and I was initiated into the covenant of Abraham. Neither Minny or Louis would talk about what Judaism really meant.

Unhappy foreskin forever severed from its origin, strangely symbolising God, Being. Circumcision was a sign of the curtailment of purely sexual being and the dedication of sexual being to the one faithful God who promised Abraham (the forefather of Muslims too) Palestine. An initiation, an ordeal into a proper *homely* humanity, yet through the baby's totally unexpected pain and blood? And what a terrible conflict then went on between Israel and the Palestinians.

I was Mordechai ben Eliezer at my circumcision, but Michael Picardie on my South African birth certificate. Mordechai was the legendary saviour of the Jews of Persia. Mi-cha-el means "who is like God?" and is the chief angel of Ha Shem – "The Name". So, the message to my identity was: remember to honour both the Jewish people and to respect God or utterly nameless Being who *was* Itself the being of Being: "I Am That I Am". The nearest one could get to Being was through the prophet of Being Moses' great exposition of His/Her/Its presence in the Burning Bush. This was written by the Jahvist writer canonically during the 6th century BCE in the midst of the Babylonian exile of the Judean king and the Israelite elite whose wealth and skills the Babylonians needed. Moses dates back to the 13th century BCE and the texts of the Jewish Pentateuch to the 10th century BCE.

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My father, still called Lazar Pekarsky, was about 6 or 7 years old in about 1905-1906 when the Pekarsky family emigrated from Kaunas, which they called Kovno, in Lithuania, to South Africa where my paternal grandfather was waiting for them with a house he had saved for in Cleveland, a gold-mining town near Johannesburg.

He and they were part of a great wave of migration to the West and to Europeanised (rather, imperialised) white settler colonies like South Africa.

As a Jew closer to my mother's Jewish orthodoxy than my father's dallying with a Christian identity, I was first sent to the Yeoville orthodox synagogue every Saturday with my friend I. J. who lived in Berea, near Yeoville. Observatory Mansions was in Bellevue East. We both went to K.E.S. - King Edward VII Preparatory School and High School.

So pervasive was racism that I.J. called me, although affectionately, "Chinky-Chinky-Chinaman" because I had Tatar eyes, nose and cheekbones like many descendants of Lithuanian Jews who were neighbours of the Tatars after they were expelled from Germany in the 13th and 14th centuries of the common era.

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When I read more about our history I was appalled: the Jews were accused of spreading the plague, the Black Death, which apparently afflicted less Jews than Christians. Perhaps because of Jews' traditional preoccupation with ritual cleanliness, there was less likelihood of their beds, garments and underwear harbouring the body fleas or body lice which spread this disease. This immunity seemed to their Christian neighbours like the work of Satan and witchcraft.

It didn't take long for the Judaism teachers at Temple Israel, the progressive reform synagogue in Hillbrow, where I was to have my *bar-mitzvah* to put me on course to read about our tragic history – to learn more than a 13-year-old should.

Jews were used as usurers, money-lenders committing the sin of charging interest, then kicked out when Christian bankers established themselves and their Christian religion absolved them of the sin of usury when they founded and donated to Christian institutions like the Crusades, churches, schools and hospitals.

They, especially the Spanish and Portuguese, robbed gold from the ancient kingdoms of Central and South America but converting the indigenous absolved them – the conquerors. African slaves were taken by the Europeans especially the British to labour in the sugar and tobacco plantations of the Caribbean, the Deep South of America and the Portuguese and Spanish colonies in central and south America, kick-starting the Western Renaissance, their Empires, their Industrial Revolutions. They, Christians, Protestant and Catholic were quite happy with a capitalist ethic in which wealth and missionary work with the exploited and enslaved produced vicarious salvation. Vicarious salvation or redemption resulted from following the crucified Jewish man.

We are still told by historians of the period, that the Spanish Jews had to practice their religion in secret given the exile of 1492 and the threat of massacres and house-burnings and *autos-de-fé*, the burning at the stake of the forcibly converted New Christians, *conversos*, suspected of being Marranos – secret Jews. Marrano actually meant both *pig* and *secret Jew* in the Spanish of the day.

The Russian Jews feared the return of the *pogroms* of the 1880s in Europe in which thousands of Jews were attacked and killed, their houses burned down by mobs of peasants and townspeople urged on by the Tsarist police and army, the Cossacks, perhaps the Tatars, even by some of the Russian orthodox clergy at Easter time when we were called Christ-killers and unscrupulous usurers and profiteers.

The Kerensky revolution of a social democratic bourgeoisie and progressive gentry in 1905 was brutally suppressed by the Tsarist regime. The German invasion of Russia in the Great War although welcomed by Jews would eventually fail and give way to Bolshevism which would mutate into anti-Jewish Stalinism.

European and Russian anti-Semitism and violently persecutory Christianity saw us, the East European Jews, called Ashkenazim, who came from places like Lithuania, East Prussia, Poland, Latvia, Belarus where we had lived for 800 years, as enemies of Jesus and His Father (and Father to all of us, but mediated through the Virgin and Jesus). There seemed to be no recognition that Jesus' mission was *not* to the gentiles at all but to the Jews, to become better Jews. For the fanatical "Christians" the only really good Jew was a dead Jew.

But Jesus' ethic was already known to us through the famous law in Leviticus about loving the neighbour. It did not say hate the non-Jewish neighbour, just be wary of him. People still behave tribally when afraid, threatened, greedy.

Although we did not see Jesus as literally the Son of God – *some of us* were still waiting for the Messiah who would be a man, a great man, a prince of peace as predicted in the book of Isaiah, and we simply could not believe in the Son of God born of a Virgin.

Most Liberal Jews did not believe in a messiah at all, but in the possibility of a messianic age. But to many Christians of Europe and parts of the West we, as much or more than the Romans, were accused of being complicit in Jesus' crucifixion.

There it was in black and white in the gospels: the high priest of the Jewish temple wanted Jesus killed because he did not deny what all thinking Jews understand: we are all sons and daughters of God, metaphorically. If, as Heidegger and Sartre suggest, God is replaced by Being in itself and for itself, immanently and transcendentally, *en soir* and *pour soir*, empirically and metaphysically, as infinite empirical complex systems and as consciousness, we are all children of Being which has to be what it is in an anthropic universe. Given enough black holes condensing into one black hole containing all of space, matter and time into a singularity, sooner or later something like a life-friendly earth would eventually come about, somewhere in a possibly infinite number of universes.

Of course, the local Christians linked by language and ancient "tribal" roots, were themselves struggling to become national entities but they, the Christian "masses" were held down by Russian, and Polish imperial and economic oppression especially of the peasantry and the urban working-

class. The Jews were a convenient scapegoat. Useful too as court-bankers, agents of capitalism, were the Rothschild families and others like them.

The bright poorer Jews had to have a universalist outlook because of the international nature of anti-Semitism and the need for working-class solidarity.

Like Marx, potential leaders of a working-class would be enraged by the suffering and death of their malnourished children in the slums of 19th century London leaving it to Marx's surviving true heir Eleanor Marx unafraid of revolution but cheated by her lover, to carry the red flag.

Karl Marx (who, by the way had two grandfathers who were rabbis), was banned from his native Prussia and never recovered his citizenship there. Marx turned some of his revolutionary rage inwards and there are anti-Semitic stereotypes in some of his writing.

In Europe oppression came from the Polish, Russian and Prussian aristocracy and upper gentry. Marx was in this context quite right.

The Jews, imported to be bailiffs and skilled workers on their estates and tax-collectors were often the *diversionary* scapegoats. Polish and other national-Christian hatred of "us" – we - the Jews - went back to medieval times in the religious ideology of the populace and their churches. Luther wrote a whole diatribe on "the Jews and their lies."

Hitler and the Nazis chose Poland as the location for most of the death-camps not only because there were, pre-Second World War, millions of Jews in Poland, but because Polish anti-Semitism was especially virulent.

Just as my friend I. J. and I spent hours in the synagogue and with Hebrew teachers, so in about the year 1904-1905 my father at 5-6 years of age spent some weekdays – it could have been three days a week, excluding the Saturday sabbath - in the Slabotka seminary, or *Yeshiva* just outside Kaunas, which Jews called Kovno, studying Hebrew-for-children, a simplified but still sacred language based on the Jewish *Torah*, the Pentateuch, the original books and parchment scrolls of which originated, as I repeat, about 900 years before the Common Era.

Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Akiva, the latter cruelly martyred in 135 CE by the Romans during the Bar Kochba revolt were importantly associated with the Talmud.

Maybe the boys, and a few girls, were helped to read one or two *selected* sentences, maybe a paragraph or a few pages which they learned by heart from the *Torah*, having been taught the Hebrew alphabet and basic grammar beforehand by the *melamed*, the school teacher.

In their everyday lives the Jews spoke Yiddish which was medieval Judaeo-German. This was the language they brought with them to Poland and Lithuania from places like Speyer and Wörms in Germany where my forefathers must have been bakers called *Becker* which became *Pekar* which became *Pekarsky* (*son of a baker*) in Poland.

Language is the house of Being, of the Name, of *Ha Shem*. Yiddish was the language of my grandparents' generation in the English-speaking countries. The emigrant Jews from Spain, the Sephardim spoke Ladino and found refuge in Holland and in the Mediterranean and Ottoman countries. Their language was Renaissance Spanish, and they knew Hebrew. The oriental Jews of the

Arab countries spoke Arabic and they, the religious *Mizrachim* (“easterners”) could read and pray in Hebrew and in Judaeo-Arabic.

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So, as I repeat, my gentle and talented father became Picardie in about 1922 when he won a bardic chair for poetry at the Johannesburg Welsh Eisteddfod which he proudly left as his heritage for me in the last months of his life in 1993, just short of his 94th birthday.

One forgets the very real inheritance of historic pain and suffering of the Jewish people. He ended his days in self-induced poverty by not trusting to the common sense of his Jewish family.

It was impossible to save the Jews by saving the Christians from their hatred of the alleged Christ-killers and poisoners of wells because a whole ethos or ideology of hatred had been built up which didn't exist in the so-called Dark Ages before the new Protestant and Catholic national states came into conflict with the universalist Roman Catholic church or each other and the Holy Roman Empire.

In the unfortunately named Dark Ages, the pre-medieval period that followed the fall of the Roman empire, the Jews had intermarried with Europeans who had converted to Judaism. They, the Ashkenazim, were already beginning to look like white Europeans, rather than the brown Semites who travelled with Abraham from Mesopotamia to Palestine.

The Europeans themselves had only recently been converted from paganism to Christianity. Those of them who could read Latin and Greek might or might not realise that the Christian religion had its roots in Judaism which is the mother of Christianity, since Jesus and most of the early apostles and evangelists like St. Paul were Jews. Only John the evangelist and apostle is thought to have been Greek.

So, I had to repeat it unless my father was to drive us mad with his Christ-mania - for Jesus his mission was not to the gentiles but to Jews who had strayed from the law of Moses or who had become inordinately rich, who oppressed women and the poor, and to exemplify the injunction to love the neighbour, the *Jewish* neighbour “as thyself”. Jesus probably wanted Jews to set an example, to comply with the vow between God and Abraham as to the Jews as a holy nation destined to inherit a promised land, also promised to Muslims who also regarded Abraham as their first patriarch.

But there was light in this sectarian scene of Abrahamic history. There were later other good reasons for there to be friendly relations between Judaism and the other Abrahamic religions. Jews who could read and translate from the Hebrew were indispensable for those Christians who were literate only in Latin, Greek and European languages. The Hebrew bible had been translated but to practice Kabbalistic mysticism one needed to know the numerical value and exact philosophical meaning of Hebrew words in the context of the whole vocabulary of the Hebrew bible. One had to know Arabic which had kept alive knowledge of the classical Greek and Roman philosophical, mathematical and scientific masterpieces when the only other source was the Alexandria Library near Cairo.

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In about 1906, whilst the recently concluded Anglo-Boer War was still festering in the South African mind, father and child, both scrubbed and clean and their clothes newly washed and ironed, the two of them, my brave paternal grandfather Moses Joseph Pekarsky took his dearly beloved first-born son aged about 7 to the only English-speaking primary school in the mining town of Cleveland near Johannesburg where, in Cleveland Mine, he ran a restaurant for Africans in the compound of the mine. The fare was more to the miners' taste than the official mine canteen because of its bigger meat content.

Taking my father to a secular school run essentially by Christians whose God seemed not to spare the Jews suffering, it was difficult not to draw the parallel with Abraham taking Isaac to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed in accordance with the command of God himself, only countermanded by an angel at the crucial last moment.

At Moses Joseph Pekarsky's restaurant he, my paternal grandfather worked from morning to night. He wanted to rise in the social ladder from being what today is a politically very incorrect description of his work as a *kaffireatnik*. His aim was to achieve a higher status as a men's outfitter, which he did become in mining towns like Krugersdorp, Randfontein and Cleveland itself. He eventually rented a shop in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg on the edge of Troyeville where he served both a few affluent black and usually well-off white customers. By then my paternal grandparents lived in Kensington, near Rhodes Park.

Moses Joseph Pekarsky must have kept his English-Yiddish text books ready to hand. He may have spent years practising the *lingua franca* of post-Boer War South Africa thus revising English lessons originating in his own boyhood in the Kaunas Jewish *gymnasium*.

After waiting in a queue outside the head-teacher's office, Eliezer or Lazar now called *Louis* so as to *Europeanise* him, my grandfather Moses Joseph and Louis were directed to the classroom of a Mrs C. who taught some of the youngest children.

My grandfather was only too pleased to be greeted with a smile from the good lady who of course spoke in perfect English to the grateful queue of parents with their sometimes anxious sometimes happy children awaiting this formidable step into the outside world. My grandfather must have said in his Yiddish accent but in good English: "I was here before during the Boer war but my wife came with Louis from Russia only a few months ago. I want him to learn perfect English from you, dear lady."

What he forgot to say was: "Please put Louis with the Jewish boys so he can learn cricket and football during religious instruction because he goes to our synagogue school every other afternoon to learn our Hebrew bible and Talmud and on Saturday he comes with me to Mayfair synagogue to pray, and about Jesus Christ he doesn't need to know."

Mrs C. was the religious instruction specialist teacher and she also taught English and all the other subjects in her own Grade One class. By the time Louis was 7 he was in Grade One. Mrs C. distributed the most beautiful Old and New Testaments combined in English bibles with line engravings and only one with glossy pictures, photographed reproductions, which she put on Louis' desk. I am reconstructing the 80-year-old scenario from hints that Louis gave me when I went back to South Africa in the late 1980s partly to look after him and bring order to his financial chaos.

He was the only Jewish boy in the religion class because, as I say, my *grandfather had forgotten* to ask for him to be excluded from Religious Instruction. Mrs C. recognising him as Jewish from his name, and his Yiddish-accented English, must have said something like: "Louis Pekarsky, would you like to play cricket and football with the other Jewish boys, or do you want to stay and learn about our religion in English?"

In the one and only *de lux* edition *in colour* in his very hands in front of him on his desk there were pictures of a decently clad Adam and Eve in skins, Abraham looking like a desert Arabian about to sacrifice Isaac with an angel calling on him from the clouds of heaven, Jacob struggling with a near naked male angel in the deepest night (lit by the moon and stars), Moses and the burning bush with a voice expressed in words; "I Am That I Am" on a streaming golden ribbon, and:

Joseph in his coat of many colours,

Joseph thrown into a pit,

his father Jacob in a state of tragic despair,

even a restrained picture of Joseph and Potiphar's wife,

Jonah and the whale,

Job in despair,

Job restored to happiness,

David and Goliath,

Solomon giving judgement to the two women arguing about which of them was the mother of the disputed child with a soldier holding a sword ready to cut the child in two...

And as for the Christian bible:

Jesus himself, gloriously beautiful, blond and blue-eyed,

giving the Sermon on the Mount,

performing miracles like the loaves and the fishes,

betrayed by Judas Iscariot,

condemned by Pontius Pilate,

crucified,
rising from the dead in his tomb,
in heaven on the right hand of God.

In violation of Jewish law, even God was pictured in the *de lux* edition for Louis's eyes only.

Making sure his hands were clean Mrs C. let him touch the glossy photographs of Italian, Flemish, Dutch and German masterpieces from the High Gothic, early Renaissance and Counter-Reformation periods bringing to life these graphic stories.

God alone knew who had provided the money for the outlay of the costly *de lux* edition. It may have been Mrs C. herself, since as Louis' own life-story unfolded, it emerged from him that he was impressed by her strong Christianity to the point that she virtually converted him.

He had the distinct impression *Mrs C.* was enthralled by Jesus' story and that a Jewish boy from Lithuania and Poland was consciously or unconsciously being evangelised into her own religion based on her teaching - surrounded as he and she were by a majority of Christian boys and the good engravings in their bibles but only the *glorious masterpieces of earlier medieval to late Renaissance painters in his copy.*

Perhaps he thought, fantastically, he would follow in the footsteps of the Christ-child so graphically gentle (until the Passion and the Crucifixion) was it all compared to the visualised but undepicted oral and written Torah and Talmud. How bloody and terrible were the travails of the Israelites and Judeans fighting tribal enemies, by comparison.

The psychological basis for this was, I think, as follows: my father in his first five years of life from 1899-1904 had to do without his father whilst Moses Joseph Pekarsky was in South Africa alone, waiting for the Anglo-Boer War to end, and trying to establish himself with an income and a home for Fayga and Louis.

His grandmother's sisters, his great-aunts, Rivste, Chaiste and Froomste (maiden names Gröenblatt) stood in as midwives and nurses for Fayga's mother, his maternal grandmother, who had died. So, I have to repeat it like a mournful prayer, these, my great-grand-aunts were left behind in Poland, probably being murdered in the Holocaust in the early 1940s when they were in their 80s unless, by a happy chance they died before the war. Their home and my paternal grandmother's and paternal grandfather's ancestral home village was Milejczyce in Poland about 60 kilometers south of Bialystok in the province of Grodno, the latter on the border of Belarus and Lithuania.

*

A Pinchas Pekarsky (and his family) died in the Holocaust according to a guide-book on Bialystok and its environs which gave an account of the Jews living in and around Milejczyce Louis' village in Poland. Pinchas may have been a brother or uncle or cousin of my paternal grandfather who

emigrated to South Africa. If the worst outcome actually happened Pinchas' family and my Gröenblatt great-grand-aunts must have been killed in a nearby forest or at a death camp in the 1940s such as Sobibor or Treblinka. An Alexander or Sasha Pecharsky a Soviet prisoner of war led a revolt and break-out from Sobibor, freeing about 40 or 50 fellow inmates. He came from Ukraine. The civilian prisoners destined for Sobibor who were not selected for work were shot or gassed on arrival. Himmler closed Sobibor soon after this revolt when Sasha freed about 50 inmates. Everything has to be repeated.

But 40 years before these terrible and tragic events, having done without a father during the Boer-War itself -1899-1902 - and immediately after when he was most needy for an attachment to a male role-model – he was the lone male in an all-female household in Milejczyce, Poland, on the border of Belarus. He never mentioned a grandfather there or in Kaunas. Only that his grandmother had died and his great-aunts were also his mother-figures in Milejczyce.

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My mother Minny Sacks died in December 1969, but Louis's second wife, an Afrikaner I call Marita Rousseau then Marita Wollen, then Marita Picardie died in the mid-1980s. Her and his life were difficult. She had been the wife of a Brigadier General Wollen, a senior political intelligence advisor to the High Commissioner for Palestine during the Second World

War but for whatever reason, they had divorced and he had left her with nothing. No even her two daughters.

Sometime before the end of 12 months after the death of my mother in December 1969 Louis engaged on this almost immediate remarriage in violation of the usual taboo involving a year's period of respectful mourning before a Jewish widower re-marries.

After Marita's death in the 1980s it became clear that he was utterly bankrupt, signs of which had already emerged because of his need for me to sell him my usufruct of my part of my mother's estate, but which left him no better off. In fact, apart from his gradually de-valuing teacher's pension he was penniless as regards capital.

He had been defrauded of perhaps as much as millions of Rand, the value of the block of flats, Observatory Mansions, which my mother had built in 1943 of which he was the part-owner.

Not only that, Marita's children, whom I was told she had abandoned after she was divorced from Brigadier Wollen, would not even send flowers to her funeral. She must have died of liver disease and needed to be in a public hospital, because she too was penniless.

In 1990 I returned to what was going to become the new South Africa and took Louis to Temple Israel where I had gone to Hebrew school and had my *bar-mitzvah*, my Jewish confirmation at the age of 13. We both said the traditional prayer for the dead, me for my mother, and he for Marita, who in her last years lamented the fact that she had not been able to help him with money, in fact blaming herself for not realising that he was in the grip of a fraudster.

I had bought a house, one of a terrace of four late Victorian or Edwardian corrugated iron-roofed houses with a small back and front garden which I shall call Figtree Square in Bellevue East and I brought him home and cooked a specially lavish Sunday lunch for him. I asked him if he wanted to come and stay with me after a doctor at the public hospital in Parktown told me he was suffering from congestive heart disease. When I broached this with him in my house, he remained silent. I took this to mean he preferred to stay at the Lourenco Marques hotel even in crime-ridden Hillbrow where his teacher's pension covered his basic costs, but where any additional expenses were subsidised by a Christian, multi-ethnic charity called The Springboks. I could meet him there every day without worrying about whether he was being properly cared for. They did look after him. I took him for hearing and eye tests and paid for my own family doctor to check his health.

His problems multiplied. The widow of a Hungarian called here pseudonymously Mrs Magyarsky who in a previous incarnation had been the governor of a women's prison incarcerating Mau Mau suspects in colonial Kenya, was now Louis's marital partner and depended on cash payments from his pension money, although mysteriously she ran a gift shop and had her own flat in Bellevue East. They all sang Christian hymns together on Sundays under the aegis of "Jews for Jesus" in the Lourenco Marques hotel subsidised by The Springboks charity. By this time, it was clear that Louis had abandoned the Judaism I upheld by taking services and running a multi-racial nursery school at Temple Israel Progressive Jewish Congregation in Hillbrow. But how was I to help him now that he had fully committed himself to what was in effect a white Christianity? He wouldn't want to stay with me away from his Christian friends.

I had embarked on a Ph.D. on South African drama at Witwatersrand University, which was not properly supervised because the professor in charge of my candidature was simply not available because of his duties as Dean of the Faculty of Arts engaged him in a combative controversy with an African professor one of whose credentials he suspected as not quite honestly correct.

The arrival of the New South Africa and Nelson Mandela's election as the first president of the democratically constituted state coincided with an alarming rise in crime. My father died in the South African autumn of 1993 before Mandela's election, the victim of pre- and post-apartheid crime. The fraudster didn't actually murder him, but caused him and me deep suffering by wrecking our relationship.

How was he to be buried? As a Christian or as a Jew?

Quite honestly, he didn't seem to care. He loved Jesus, but he also loved God. To me Jesus' ministry, as Jesus himself stated, was to bring Jews who had strayed from the fold of the Mosaic law, back into the milieu of Judaism. So, in the original sense meant by Jesus, he should be buried as a Jew, and he was buried as a Jew as the real, historic Jesus would have wanted in the West Park Jewish cemetery.

In 1994 I went to a reception for "veterans" given by Nelson Mandela as the first president of the new democratic South Africa in the grounds of the Union Buildings in the administrative capital Pretoria. Apart from shaking the great man's hand and sitting with old comrades who had been in the Congress of Democrats, the white ally of the African National Congress, I received a greeting from Indian members of the Congress Alliance, congratulating me on being my father's son. He had been happiest as a teacher in the Johannesburg Asian High School.

I had made criticisms as a comrade doubting the wisdom, efficiency and Soviet Marxist ideology of the Congress Alliance and the South African Communist Party which was its nerve centre. Quite honestly the new government opened the doors of the new South Africa to anybody and everybody and crime was escalating. The new multiracial elite was plundering the state. Nelson Mandela was a figurehead, too old and tired after 27 heroic years on Robben Island to actually hold his own or Thabo Mbeki's disastrous governments to account.

But at last I was able to leave my father to rest in his Jewish grave in the very doubtfully new South Africa, as the real Jewish Jesus, not Christ the messiah, would have wanted.