

Chaim, where the heart is

From politics and religion to genetically kosher pigs, the columnist Chaim Bermant was one of Jewry's most humane, provocative and hilarious writers, as a collection of his work, compiled by his widow Judy, confirms

I was to interview Judy Bermant, widow of writer Chaim Bermant whose 'On the other Hand' column enthralled, convulsed, amused and enraged readers of the Jewish Chronicle for more than 20 years until his death in 1998.

So I decided to dip into the collection of his pieces, edited by Mrs Bermant, which was published last week by Robson Books under the same title as his famous column.

I dipped. I became immersed. The grass remained unmowed, the hedge untrimmed, the dinner uncooked, the weekly expedition to the supermarket postponed. I smiled, I laughed, I guffawed, I frowned, I nodded vigorously and occasionally I punched the air with delight.

Read together like this, his columns are a machine gun attack on everything that is silly, extreme, hypocritical and wrong-headed from religion, Israel and the Board of Deputies of British Jews to modern literature and even food fads. He whirls freely, firing bullets from the hip that fly with unerring accuracy and bring with them drops of poisonous accuracy, acumen and hilarity.

He also celebrates his love of Judaism, of Jewish tradition, food, tolerance and culture. He castigates pomposity, mendacity and some elements of the Jewish establishment. And yet he does all this without compromising his own observant orthodoxy and without dislocating himself from the community he so loves - and pillories.

He writes, for example, of ultra orthodox rabbis in Israel: "They have always been able to use their influence to stop the buses on Shabat; they have now stopped the planes; given half the chance they would stop all life. But I have never heard them utter a plea for tolerance,

decency, justice or any of the qualities which make human society civil and human."

He is even tougher on the "corrupt" American rabbis of the right wing Rabbinical Coalition: "In place of humility, these rabbis of the American Orthodox persuasion preach arrogance; in place of mercy, they preach cruelty; and in place of justice, they preach injustice."

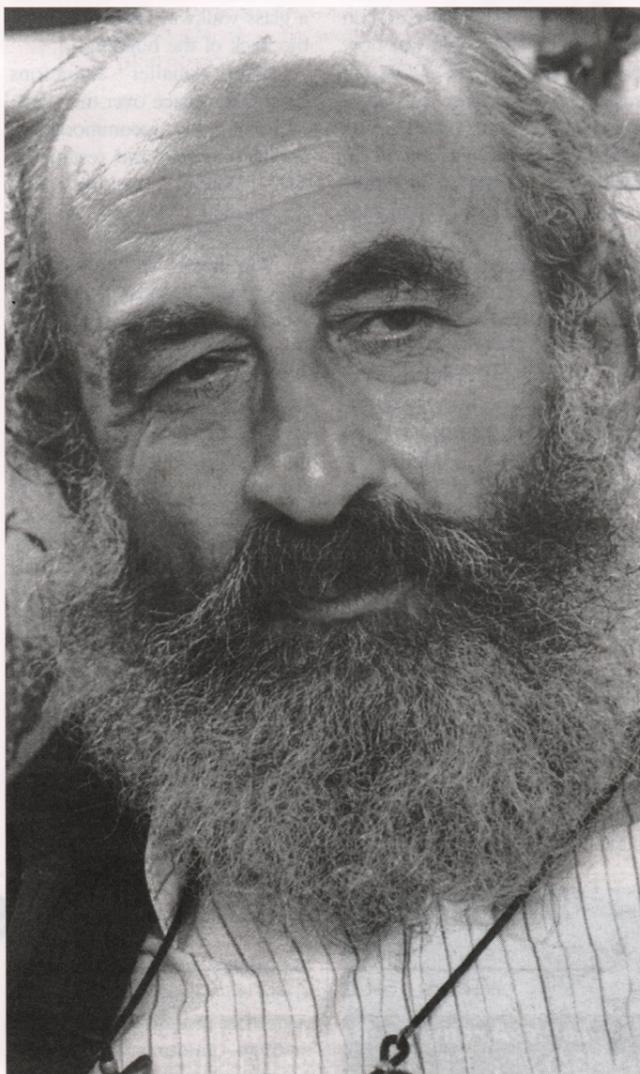
His thoughtful column on the death of Primo Levi in 1987, includes the following observation: "He doesn't preach forgiveness or forgetfulness, but he does suggest a need to transcend the experience and avoid bitterness so that his main characters emerge from their torments not only with their souls and their sanity intact, but even with their sense of humour. To be embittered, he seems to say, to harp on the past, is to give Hitler a post-humous victory."

Bermant used a similar argument when, in 1997, he argued against the proposal that Holocaust denial should be made a criminal offence. He believed that the Holocaust had to be put into context of Jewish history and not regarded as the only important thing that ever happened; that constant harping on the Holocaust stopped the Jewish community from going forward.

He believed passionately in the healing powers of, er, cricket, arguing in 1982: "There may come a time when Israel will be at peace with its neighbours, but it will never be at peace with itself until the principles and practices of cricket are more widely understood, and until every yeshivah [rabbinical college] student is given a thorough grounding in the game."

He complains about an anti-Semitic cat in the neighbourhood; he writes hilariously about genetically kosher pigs; waxes lyrical about the joys of a good cholent ("with a kugel on the top like the crust of a volcano").

Chrane (horseradish sauce) he argues, "is not a sauce as such, nor even a condiment, but rather a local anaesthetic which temporarily deadens the taste buds so as to render almost any



Jewish food such as boiled gefilte fish [fish balls] palatable."

His razor sharp wit slices through to the very psyche of the Jewish experience. What other group of people are so obsessed with sending large parcels to relatives with travellers about to board an airplane?

Most of all I love him for this "Harold Pinter is a man of few words, most of them silly."

So it was almost with tears still in my eyes that I went to see Mrs Bermant who still lives in the house in Hill Rise, Hampstead Garden Suburb, that they bought 34 years ago.

They met in 1962 at a lunch in Stamford Hill. He was already an irreverent writer, she was from a very orthodox home and had trained (at St Martins) as an artist. After a whirlwind romance they married the same year.

"He was not one of those people who was funny all the time," she told me. "But if he had an audience, whether it was a dinner party or a room full of people, he was a real performer. All he needed was an audience,

and I often think that where he really wanted to be was on the stage."

At other times he would rage and rail against the world: "There were times when he was literally lost for words, when he would throw his hands up as if to say 'What can we do with them?'"

"I don't think I have ever seen him so angry and distressed as when Israel invaded Lebanon. He took it personally and felt that he just had to say what he believed. And people got so angry with what he said, they just couldn't understand what he was talking about."

Chaim Bermant was born in Barovke, a small town in Latvia. At the age of eight or nine he came with his parents (his father was a rabbi) to live in Glasgow.

He was expelled from school for playing truant (in order to go and read in the public library) and did his matric through correspondence course - a tale he once told to JFS school students in Camden, much to the horror of assembled teachers and bigwigs.

He attended a yeshivah for a time, then went to Israel for a year on a Zionist youth movement leadership course. He went to university in Glasgow, emerging with an MA in politics and economics, and later to the LSE where he took an MSc, after which he spent some time teaching economics (mainly to Arab students) in Tunbridge Wells.

His great love was writing, though, and he soon returned to that, working with, among

others, the great documentary maker John Grierson at Scottish TV, on Searchlight, and on World in Action.

He went to work at the JC in 1961, becoming features editor from 1964 to 1966. He was the main contributor to the Ben Azai column and, in 1979, was finally given his own column.

For Mrs Bermant, editing the book was clearly a labour of love. She spent the whole of last summer in the JC's office ("I think I drove them potty") digging out all the articles and columns - around 2,000 of them. She whittled them down to 200 and then again to the final 130.

"People had all told me about their favourite columns, which were mainly the funny ones, but I was determined also to include the things he felt strongly about. I was firm in the view that the serious pieces would have to play a central role, and actually be at the centre of the book."

"Over the years, and by saying things again and again and again, he did finally begin to get through to people. He was a lone voice for so long, but now other people are saying the same things. I believe that in many areas, he really did make a difference".

MATTHEW LEWIN

On the Other Hand, by Chaim Bermant (edited by Judy Bermant), Robson Books, £18.95.

This article first appeared in the Hampstead & Highgate Express.

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