



SIEGBERT PRAWER

Siegbert Salomon Prawer 1925–2012

SIEGBERT PRAWER was born in Cologne on 15 February 1925, the son of a Polish immigrant father and a German mother. He came as a refugee to Britain in 1939 and made his career here. He was the bearer of several names: Siegbert; Schlomo Nachman ben Mordechai; Bert; and—almost—Stanley Parkinson. Each one labels a phase of what, in an unpublished memoir, he called ‘an uneventful life’. Yet it was a life decisively shaped by the events of twentieth-century history. It was in many ways typical of Jewish exile scholars, but luckier than most.

The first of those names was chosen by his mother, a Wagner enthusiast, as a follow-on from the heroes of the *Ring des Nibelungen*, Siegmund and Siegfried. That is one small sign of how strongly an educated Jewish family felt itself to be not just Germans but proud possessors of German culture. Grandfather Cohn was likewise a cultural patriot. Trained as a singer at the Berlin Music Academy alongside the later celebrated operatic and Lieder performer Alexander Kipnis, he was devoted to German music, especially Bach. (‘How could such a genius be called “Brook”? He was an Ocean!’). He nevertheless aspired to be a ‘Kantor’, a career choice that again embodied the symbiotic flexibility Jewish Germans took for granted. He duly became ‘Oberkantor’—a bass, something rare in that professional role—at the golden-domed Cologne synagogue. His work for inter-faith charities was recognised by a testimonial engraving of the Cologne Rathaus signed by the then Lord Mayor, Konrad Adenauer.

‘Schlomo’, followed by the patronymic, is the Hebrew form of Siegbert’s second name, Salomon. ‘Nachman’ indicates that he was a ‘replacement child’, given the same name as a baby who had died a cot death. ‘Bert’,

colloquially and socially as remote as possible from Wagnerian heroics, was how he was happy to be known by his English schoolfellows and the family he eventually lived with, and 'Bert' he remained for them through their lifelong connection. 'Stanley Parkinson', finally, is the name he was at one point pressed to adopt in order to complete his Englishness, preserving only his original initials. He resisted, out of family piety. The mismatch the name would have created with his never fully English, exotic-rabbinical persona is hilarious to contemplate.

His upbringing in Cologne, in a kosher but only mildly religious household (he was taken to synagogue, where the repetitiousness of the services bored him stiff), was in other respects remarkably easy-going. He was a free-range boy, allowed to read anything in his grandfather's large library and to wander about the city alone, fetching home whatever books he liked, to read unsupervised, from secondhand and junk shops and the library, and going as often as possible to the cinema. Film swiftly rivalled reading, and would later become an obsessive interest and a strong academic sideline. Theatre was soon added, and became another lasting enthusiasm. These were solitary pleasures, not shared even by his sister Ruth—the later novelist and scriptwriter for Merchant Ivory films, Ruth Praver Jhabvala.

Praver was eight when the Nazis came to power and the pressures on Jews quickly intensified, often in petty yet painful ways that directly affected him. Jews could not borrow from the library or visit cinemas and theatres. That left only a Jewish cultural centre where out-of-work actors gave readings: 'The world about us grew more and more empty.' On the street, gangs of 'Aryan' boys taunted and attacked young Jews. The best defence was to walk as close as possible to some respectable 'Aryan' passer-by, who had enough decency at this level to provide protection. The only positively friendly group were the city's homosexuals, one set of outcasts sympathising with another. On the larger, grimmer scene, the systematic onslaught on Jewish professionals and businesses, culminating in 'Kristallnacht' (during which his grandfather's synagogue was burned down), made emigration a pressing thought. Father, a self-taught fiduciary lawyer for Jewish clients, wanted to join a relation in Israel, growing citrus fruit. Mother and son were vehement that it was to be Europe. England it finally was, already at a perilously late stage.

This had to be a private arrangement. Siegbert might not even have been accepted on the 'Kindertransport' organised by his school, so unpopular had his behaviour made him. Rejected by the prestigious Humboldt-Gymnasium on the ground that the quota for Jews was full, he was

resentful and unmotivated as a pupil at the Jewish 'Jawneh'. Bad behaviour was in any case, on his own account, an early tendency; even as a small child he would chant as a mantra his preference for '*böse sein*'. Classroom disorder was at its peak in the drawing lessons which the prominent painter Ludwig Meidner was reduced to giving, now that his work had been branded 'degenerate' by the Nazis. But outside class he would invite pupils to sit for him. Siegbert leapt at the chance of developing graphic skills in return—he was fascinated from early on by the comic draftsmanship of Wilhelm Busch, author of the classic tale of *Max und Moritz*. He sat trying to draw Meidner while the artist was drawing him. A striking portrait of the twelve-year-old is preserved, which captures his potential for mischief.

Immigration to England was sponsored by a Jewish contact in Coventry, the family of the Polish-born engineer Issor Avner. They took Siegbert and Ruth in, while the parents stayed in London trying to find work, living meanwhile for a year off the sale of their Steinway piano. Coventry Education Committee laid the foundations for Praver's career, subsidising the fees so he could go to King Henry VIII Grammar School (and Ruth to Stoke Park). The school itself transformed a trouble-maker into a highly motivated pupil. Not only could there be gratitude in place of resentment, but he could feel himself—perhaps obscurely as yet—'part of an institution respected and fostered by city and state'. Later he would come to recognise his deep need for such stable sheltering environments after the upheavals of his early years.

He quickly acquired 'Englisch' (the 'c' he inscribed on the cover of his first exercise book was the first error corrected) and in due course a liking for English literature began to moderate the belief in the absolute superiority of German culture in which he had been brought up. In the cinema too, English actors from Charles Laughton to George Formby now jostled with his German favourites. It was then an obvious step to experience Shakespeare in the original (he had seen productions in Cologne of the Schlegel-Tieck translations). So he was dispatched—free ranging once again—to nearby Stratford to see *Richard III*: three half-crowns and three prepared phrases would get what he needed: a return ticket on the Midland Red bus, an upper gallery seat in the Memorial Theatre and a poached egg on toast after the show. It was a memorable, though hardly yet a linguistic, let alone a literary experience; at all events, it was the start of a devotion to Shakespeare that would later take the form of putting up in Stratford to see the new season's productions.

Despite being the sole refugee at King Henry VIII, the new boy never met with any hostility or aggression. (He later learned that the Headmaster, A. A. C. Burton, had issued a stern advance warning.) There was only curiosity about his background and, at worst, laughter at his pronunciation. Against that, he soon forged ahead in language and literary work. Any possible envy over his classroom achievements was offset by his total inability to catch or hit a ball or to be other than a tail-ender in a cross-country run.

War disturbed the Coventry idyll, though not by affecting the boy's status. Because of pre-war German immigration rules, his father had kept Polish nationality, so the son had it too: he was thus a 'friendly', not an 'enemy alien'. But then the massive bombing raid on Coventry in November 1940 left him looking at even worse Nazi destruction than the aftermath of Kristallnacht in Cologne. There were gaps the next day at registration, and the baths where the school had its swimming lessons were a temporary morgue. Much of the school's activity was moved for safety to Alcester, and the refugee became an evacuee. Once again he fell on his feet. Along with his friend Stan he was billeted on a family who ran a fish shop and fruiterers. The Deveys' cordiality towards the two boys, the friendliness of their own three children, their ample sources of food and the mother's traditional way of cooking it together meant that Siegbert was 'never more happy and contented in my whole life'. English family life and BBC wartime comedy broadcasts added variety to his earthy Kölsch sense of humour.

After the war further progress at school earned Praver a scholarship to read English and German at Jesus College, Cambridge. The award left a shortfall in living expenses, and aliens were not eligible for a state scholarship, but once more Coventry generously stepped in and made up the difference. Having waited a while for a National Service call-up that did not come, he went up to Cambridge in Trinity Term 1944. His principal tutor in English was E. M. W. Tillyard, and in German Leonard Forster. Other eminent scholars to whom he remained grateful were Muriel Bradbrook, Trevor Jones and Robert Auty. He learned much from F. R. and Queenie Leavis, without becoming an acolyte.

As a graduate he transferred to Christ's and was supervised by Brian Downs. He began to teach first-year undergraduates, consciously aiming now at a university, not a school, career. He had concentrated on German for Part Two of the Tripos, following Tillyard's realistic if dispiriting advice that, as a non-native with a foreign accent (which never wholly left him), he had no chance of appointment to an English department. He was

lucky again. Roy Pascal, Professor of German at Birmingham, had been the external examiner on the board that awarded Praver's First, and offered him the next available job in his small department. Pascal became the greatest single influence on his professional life, an admired and beloved father figure. (Praver's own father had committed suicide after learning of the deaths of parents, siblings and friends in Czestochowa during the Nazi invasion of Poland.)

Career luck continued. Praver was in New York on a Fulbright exchange to Columbia University when the German Department of City College needed a temporary Assistant Professor. He began to build a teaching reputation in American academe and further invitations followed. He always declined invitations to take a permanent post in an American university, feeling he owed too much to the country that had given him asylum. Over the course of his career he taught at Chicago, Harvard, Irvine, Pittsburgh and Brandeis, Otago and Hamburg, with a late research fellowship at Canberra. A corresponding sequence of honorary degrees and academy memberships abroad and at home—he was elected to the British Academy in 1981—came his way.

From the first at Birmingham, his lectures and literary readings were spell-binding. He had a strong sense of theatre, and had joined the Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Society (ADS) expressly to learn voice production for teaching purposes. Teaching was for him always the most important aspect of his career, and he remained throughout his career in the best sense a performer, in a profession that pays less attention than it might to the technique of live communication. On the actual stage in Cambridge and Birmingham, Praver only ever played relatively minor parts (they included the villain Wurm in Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*). His last role, in a dramatic come-back shortly before his death, was as the Lord in a student production of Goethe's *Faust* in the chapel of The Queen's College, Oxford. That he never in his life acted in Shakespeare was a keenly felt regret. It might have been different if he had joined the Cambridge Marlowe Society, but Tillyard had advised him not to spread his theatrical involvement beyond the ADS.

Publication was beginning to match his reputation as a teacher, and it was clear he would outgrow his Birmingham lectureship. After fifteen years there, in 1964 he was appointed to the chair of German at Westfield College in the University of London. It was at first a happy location for a theatre-lover, and he became a frequent first-nighter; but he stayed only five years. An acute need arose, above all for his wife's sake, to get away from the area where his first son had been killed in a road accident.

Opportunely, the chair of German at Oxford fell vacant and he was appointed. He was happy to have a post that had no dominant administrative role. (The nearest he ever came to that was the Honorary Directorship of the Institute of Germanic Studies of the University of London.) The Oxford chair carried a fellowship at The Queen's College, and he became deeply attached to this last of his protective institutions. He remained in retirement a regular and popular presence in the Senior Common Room as well as officiating for some years as Dean of Degrees.

As a publishing scholar, Praver began in 1952 with a volume of interpretations—*German Lyric Poetry: a Critical Analysis of Selected Poems from Klopstock to Rilke* (London, 1963)—which he later judged 'an immature book'. His work essentially took off with an analysis of Heinrich Heine's *Buch der Lieder* (London, 1960), impressive beyond its modest purpose as a student guide. There followed immediately a real *tour de force* on the poet's grittier mature work, *Heine the Tragic Satirist* (Cambridge, 1961). The involvement with German lyric led on naturally to a 'Buch der Lieder' of Praver's own, a selection of the texts to German songs in the original and in translation, the *Penguin Book of Lieder* (1964) which was much used by professional and amateur singers. It contained a biographical note that he led a quiet life with his family and a large collection of records. The collection was promptly stolen.

Heine remained a main focus of Praver's interests, not now interpreting poetry but exhaustively documenting thematic strands that ran through the writer's whole oeuvre: *Heine's Jewish Comedy: a Study of his Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford, 1983), which he judged his best book, and *Frankenstein's Island: England and the English in the Writings of Heinrich Heine* (Cambridge, 1986). Tracing motifs into every textual nook and cranny, they build up a coherent picture of two of Heine's major themes. These are highly readable studies to which nothing will ever need to be added.

Much the same sovereign command of sources and deft technique in their deployment had already been displayed in *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford, 1976), which had the additional interest that here was literature as part of the panoply of a major historical figure, touching political reality even more closely than Heine's satire. Praver had come fresh to Marx despite having worked for fifteen years in a mildly Marxist department, and personally 'under Roy Pascal's left wing'. He would probably never have worked on Marx at all but for the term spent teaching in Hamburg at just the time when German students were busy politicising literary study and 'reeducating their professors'. Praver went to hear what

would be said about his post-war poetry seminar by one of the student ginger-groups, in which Marx was naturally on the agenda. That led him to catch up on the original writings, where he found to his surprise how often Marx had exploited literary sources. It was a quirky instance of the Humboldtian principle of the 'unity of teaching and research'. One Hamburg student was later important for a further aspect of Praver's work: Hans-Michael Bock, who became a leading historian of German film and an ally in Praver's increasing involvement in film studies, the most substantial results of which were *Caligari's Children* (Oxford, 1980) and *Between Two Worlds: the Jewish Presence in German and Austrian Film 1910–1933* (Oxford, 2005). If film had been part of university curricula earlier, he might well have made film his main specialism.

Another new move was into comparative literature, which, though well established elsewhere, was only beginning, through the efforts of Richard Sayce, to be offered as a graduate course in Oxford at the moment when Praver arrived. A prompt convert—he saw this as a context in which to confirm Germany as 'a valuable partner in the conversation of mankind'—he was soon writing a short introduction to the discipline, *Comparative Literary Studies* (London, 1973), and eventually became president of the Comparative Literature Association. He also worked up five terms' lectures over two academic years on the history of literary theory, although he laid no claim to being a theorist himself and remained convinced that 'nothing could take the place of discussion of specific texts'. His own practice was 'a combination of enthusiasm and analysis', and he believed that feeling was more essential to his nature and his work than thinking. There is something markedly British-empirical about this priority. He had after all left Germany young enough not to be led into the traditional German labyrinth of academic abstraction.

The most surprising departure was a post-retirement trilogy of volumes on Thackeray, *Israel at Vanity Fair: Jews and Judaism in the Writings of W. M. Thackeray* (Leiden 1992), *Breeches and Metaphysics: Thackeray's German Discourse* (Oxford, 1997) and *W. M. Thackeray's European Sketch Books: a Study of Literary and Graphic Portraiture* (Oxford, 2000). The fascination lay in the way the novelist matched his own graphic illustrations to his writing. Praver's early interest in drawing had never left him, and he had an above-average ability to capture a likeness in pencil or pen sketches of colleagues, at meetings or based on photographs. For some years he provided drawings for the *Oxford Magazine*, and The Queen's College preserves his rogues' gallery of the fellowship, no doubt made in moments of less absorbing governing body business. Gradually failing

eyesight put a stop to regular drawing, but he went on signing letters and cards to friends with lightning self-caricatures.

Prawer's last enthusiasm was for Yiddish, which had not been part of his upbringing, and his very final public lecture, a few months before his death, was on a Yiddish poet's response to Byron. By this time colleagues were accustomed to disbelieving that anything would be 'his last'—he had by now applied the term to several books, in a retirement that was virtually as fruitful as his career in post had been. Some further slender volumes on individual films—*The Blue Angel* (London, 2002), *Nosferatu* (London, 2004)—and a concise study of Freud's use of English-language literature *A Cultural Citizen of the World: Sigmund Freud's Knowledge and Use of British and American Writings* (London, 2009) really were the last. Meantime he was enjoying his large collection of films on DVD and still avidly reading, especially relishing again the great nineteenth-century European novels. He was also, while still mobile, to be seen browsing in the charity shops for more books to fill his house yet fuller.

In his own modest judgement, Prawer 'was never a brilliant student or (later) a ground-breaking scholar'. Behind that assessment lay a further conviction of the gap between scholarship and the primal creativity exemplified by the novels and film scripts of his sister, Ruth. But within the scholarly sphere, a remarkable Anglo-German-Jewish symbiosis had created a corpus of immense variety, empathetic substance and lucidity.

In 1949 Prawer married Helga Schaefer, whose escape from Nazi Germany had been even more touch-and-go than his. They had two sons and two daughters. Their family life maintained many observances, in harmony with Prawer's lifelong loyalty to the Jewish community. Throughout his professional life, Helga in best rabbinical tradition took care of all practical arrangements, especially for his guest professorships, easing his 'indelible travel-phobia'. He would then stay in his relocated study while she and the family enjoyed exploring the new environment. She died in 2002.

Over his final years Prawer suffered from Crohn's disease and from a long-drawn-out bone cancer, but he was able to control the pain and remain resolutely cheerful, quoting to those colleagues old enough to remember it the catchphrase of wartime *ITMA*'s gloomy character Mona Lott, "'It's bein' so cheerful as keeps me goin'". He also remained intellectually and socially undiminished. Though he had confessedly never been easy in social gatherings practising small-talk, he did greatly enjoy the company of colleagues, taking a keen interest in their work and their families during the visits that continued until the week before his death.

In his last decade, Praver formed a happy relationship with the former Queen's librarian Helen Powell. Her loving care enabled him both to retain some mobility and to continue living at home among his books, films and records to the last. He died on 10 April 2012.

T. J. REED

Fellow of the Academy

Note. All quotations are from unpublished autobiographical memoirs. I am grateful to Helen Powell and Jonathan Praver for kindly providing me with their transcriptions.

This article is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

