

President's Report 2008-2009 Season

The Lit had an unusually large programme in its 121st year, featuring 9 events, including a concert, a debate and a community service event. It opened with a retrospective of the work of the Glaswegian artist Hannah Frank in her centennial year presented by her niece Fiona Frank. Photographs and original prints of the artist's now rarely seen works were shown. Stories from the life of the artist and excerpts from her diary revealed what a sense of humour she had and outrageous character she could be. Sadly, Hannah Frank passed away a few months ago. But due to the efforts of her niece her artistic legacy will survive.

For the second event, we were privileged by a return address by Professor Susannah Heschel, who was on leave at the University of Edinburgh from Dartmouth College in the US, where she holds the Eli Black Chair in Jewish studies. She spoke about the development of "Aryan Theology" in Germany and its extraordinary attempt to remove the Tanach (the "Old Testament") from Christianity. Originating prior to the rise of the Nazis, the movement flourished during those dark times, and its pernicious ideas continue to reverberate in some theological corners today.

The third event was a first for the Lit in at least my memory: a debate between scientists and theologians. The topic was stem cell research and the controversy behind its development and applications. Representing the scientific point of view was the biologist and stem-cell researcher Dr Joshua Brickman of the University of Edinburgh, Rabbi Rose from the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, and Dr Murdo Macdonald, the Policy Officer of the Church of Scotland. Each gave a succinct discussion of their point of view, after which there was an extended period of questions from the audience regarding the methods and uses of the research, and the differing religious perspectives on them.

As a public service to the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, and as part of a UK-wide initiative, the Lit sponsored a discussion regarding the role of women in the Jewish community. The goal was to examine how much progress had been made since the ground-breaking review of Jewish women's lives, "Women in the Jewish Community," by Rosalind Preston fourteen years ago.

Following on National Holocaust Day, the second half of the season began with a talk by Dr Margaret Brearley, an Anglican scholar and the Director of the West Midlands Israel Information Centre, who spoke on "Nazism and Nature: some roots of the Holocaust." She described the creation of an artificial nature-oriented German mythology used to justify Nazi ideology and its opposition to Judaeo-Christian morality.

The Lit was next treated to a very well-attended concert performed by Caritas Strings from George Watson's College, organised under the baton of Hector Scott. The concert doubled as an event in the Edinburgh Festival of Mideast Spirituality. The programme from this talented group of young musicians featured pieces by Jewish composers, including Mendelssohn, Bloch, and rarely heard lovely works by Mazas and Sodomka. Included also were works by Mozart, Vivaldi and the Scottish composer Edward McGuire, piped beautifully by one of the youngest members of the orchestra. As a surprise to the Lit organisers on the night of the concert, the orchestra was not in fact conducted by Mr Scott but by his colleague David Elliott, as Mr Scott was needed to play viola in the absence of one of its members who was off on a school trip. It caused some confusion as to whom to present the Lit's gift of a bottle of whiskey, but was resolved by presenting the whiskey to Mr Scott and a cheque of concert proceeds to Mr Elliott.

For Purim, Lit committee members Elaine Samuel and Heather Valencia pooled Lit members talents for an entertaining evening of humorous poems and readings on the theme of "Jews Behaving Badly."

The next event was presented by Claire Ungerson, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at the University of Southampton, who spoke on "The rescue of Jewish men from greater Germany in 1939: the case of the Kitchener Camp in East Kent." Using visual material, diaries, memoirs and interviews, Professor Ungerson illustrated some of the important issues connected with this refugee camp for some 4000 Jewish men: Why was the camp only for men, how were the men selected, and why was the British government willing to waive the usual visa requirements to allow these refugees into the UK?

The season wrapped up with a delightful discussion by the Mannheim journalist Joachim Hemmerle on the "Yiddish puppet theatre "Hakl-Bakl." Hebrew for "a little bit of everything," Hakl-Bakl was the product of the imagination of the Romanian-born artist and dramatist Simcha Schwartz. In Paris after the Second World

War, he longed to form a Yiddish repertory company but lacked the funds for human performers, so created instead a theatre of puppets. They became his and his wife's friends for several years, where through their imaginative recreations of Jewish stories like "David and Goliath," they recreated a little of the vanished Yiddish-speaking world of Eastern Europe. It drew large crowds of even the non-Yiddish speaking public, so popular were the performances. Even the artist Marc Chagall was drawn in to provide designs for the puppet clothing and sets. Of particular interest were recollections from Simcha's surviving second wife, Ruth, whose stories gave an impression of the enormous enthusiasm Simcha had for theatre and his puppets.

This season the Lit attempted an experiment by serving tea prior to the events rather than after, in the hopes of allowing the later evening to be free for attendees, which we thought may encourage greater attendance. It is unclear the experiment was a success and perhaps should be reviewed alongside other ideas for maintaining, and even increasing, the interest of the community in its events. The President would also like to express his gratitude to Julia Merrick, who provided the posters advertising the events, and to our Secretary Tony Gilbert and Treasurer Micheline Brannan for their essential support.

Avery Meiksin, President
Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society
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