

A Purim in Krakow Proclaims Jewish Survival

By David R. Slavitt, Jewz.com

I had been working on a translation of the "Book of Lamentations" — at the very least, a nervy undertaking.

John Donne had done it. And some of the other versions in English are very good. But few of them do what the Hebrew does, which is to run down the alphabet in those peculiar acrostics that appear so often in the psalms and in some of the passages in the Prophets, and in "piyyutim" — poems written between the fifth and 14th century, many of which have worked their way into the liturgy.

But the "Book of Lamentations" is not very long, and to make it into a publishable book, I had planned to write an introduction, one that would capture the same general incantational keening as the biblical text for which it would prepare the way.

"Lamentations" is the saddest book in the Bible, and maybe the saddest book there is. So to translate it, I thought it would be a good idea to go to Jerusalem to see the Temple Mount, which is more or less the gate of Heaven, and then to go to Poland, where my mother's people are from but where I'd never been, and go to Auschwitz to see the gate of Hell.

As it happened, my visit last year to Auschwitz-Birkenau fell on the Fast of Esther, which is of course erev Purim and a good day — or maybe the least bad day — on which to make such a visit. One goes to Auschwitz with trepidation — uneasy about how the place has become a museum of itself, a confrontation not just with the Nazi horror but with well-intended curators who have made various decisions with which one may or may not agree. And of course one feels dismay at the

triviality of one's objections.

Auschwitz doesn't look so bad. Beyond the famous gate with the grotesquely upbeat "Arbeit Macht Frei" — "Work Sets You Free" motto, its rectangular buildings on tree-lined paths look like those of a seedy housing project or maybe a reform school, but they are not



remarkably menacing or depressing.

Birkenau is the place of unbelievable and unrelieved ugliness, a mind-numbing expanse of sheds that would be inadequate for horses or chickens arrayed in unrelenting geometrical regularity on swampy ground at the far end of which were the gas chambers and the crematoria.

On this day in late March, there were 17 buses in the parking lot. And gaggles of tourists from America or organized groups of schoolchildren from Israel were trooping through. You could tell they were Israelis because several of them carried large flags, as if to proclaim that the Nazis lost and the Jews won — which is not much help to those who actually suffered and died here.

There are signs to inform visitors that, out of respect for the dead, they should not raise their voices or eat ice cream here. These high-school-age youngsters might have been noisy enough but they were not eating ice cream.

Back in Krakow, there are still live Jews — a couple of hundred — who had survived or come

back. Kazimierz, the Jewish section of town, has a number of synagogues that have mostly become museums of themselves.

Tourists come here either to see what Jewish life in Poland was once like, or else on a kind of Spielberg tour, looking for places that appear in "Schindler's List," which is "real" for them in the way that the reality isn't. This is slightly unsettling.

But across the street is the Ramuh Synagogue, the name of which is the acronym by which Rabbi Mojzesz Isserless is popularly known. He is buried in a prominent place in the adjacent cemetery, and pious Jews come from all over the world to pray at his grave on Lag b'Omer, which is the 18th of Iyar, the anniversary of his death.

The synagogue is a small, not inelegant building that was erected in 1553, which makes it the second oldest shul in town. It was renovated and modernized in 1933, looted during the occupation, used for a while after the war by the fire brigade, but then reconstructed in 1957, at which time its late Baroque interior decoration was restored. The beautiful wrought-iron work of the bimah is a copy of what was there before.

More important than the building or its decorations was the fact that an actual congregation of Polish Jews was meeting here and, at the bimah, an 85-year-old man in an elaborate tallit — or prayer shawl — was chanting the story of Esther and how the Jews survived in ancient Shushan.

Someone handed me a gragger so that, at the mention of Haman's hated name, I too could twirl my noisemaker.

The Megillah of Esther is a strange story, a folk tale really, in which the fate of the Jews hangs on an Arabian Nights reversal and

with a conclusion of extravagant revenge. But these men, most of them elderly, were spinning their graggers or banging on the reading desks or jingling their keys as if they were kids.

We may not have won in the way those Israeli kids seemed to be proclaiming with their waving flags, but we seem somehow to have survived so that, as it says in the Megillah, "these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed." ☆

Poet and translator David R. Slavitt wrote this essay for JBooks.com, a publication of the Jewz.com Media Network.

Save the Date!

Purim

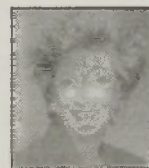
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Berries for Booze — At Purim and Year-round

With Visions of Topsy Elephants, Kibbutz Ketura Produces Liqueur that Humans Love, Too

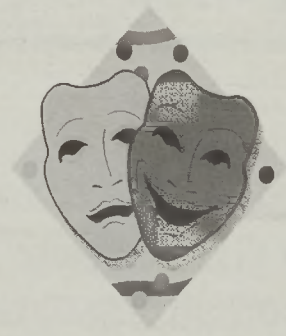
Kibbutz Ketura, Israel — Drunken elephants and a secret recipe carried to Israel by a Russian — no they're not elements of a bestselling spy thriller. This is the story of the production of Marula liqueur, the unlikely but successful product manufactured by a kibbutz in Israel's water-starved Arava region just north of Eilat.

Twenty-seven-year old Kibbutz Ketura, started by idealistic American graduates of Hadassah's Young Judaea youth movement, has become famous in Israel, not just for turning the desert green, but for producing some of the country's weirdest produce in its experimental garden. It's the only place in Israel where you can get the exotically pitai, a pink spiny fruit. Herbs are scientifically grown to fulfill requests for rare Tibetan medicines recommended by the Dalai Lama and supervised by doctors at Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem. And experiments have begun on a plant that requires no water at all.

Now the Kibbutz is growing berries for booze — the exotic marula fruit associated with tippy elephants tripping through African forests.

Ketura's agricultural magician is Dr. Elaine Solowey, who immigrated in 1974 from the food-producing Central Valley region of California. Supported by grants from Ben-Gurion University and

the Jewish Agency, Solowey set out to prove that nearly anything could be grown in the desert. In 1985, the kibbutz members arranged a special plant exchange between their orchard and the Ministry of Agriculture in the southern African nation of Botswana. The Africans received plants from Israel, namely the date and pomegranate, and Ketura



received the marula tree, one of the most valued indigenous trees in Africa.

In the African summer, the olive green fruit of the marula tree ripens to a golden yellow and its intense tropical fragrance floats on the warm, summer breeze, luring various species of wild animals from miles around. Herds of elephants walk for days in order to gorge themselves on the fruit, hence the marula tree has come to

be known as the "Elephant Tree."

Dr. Solowey thought that this tree would be particularly suitable for Ketura's desert environment. The marula uses only a quarter of the water needed by a regular citrus tree to grow, but its fruit has four times the vitamin C content of an average orange. Only the female marula trees bear the succulent, tart fruit. Today, Solowey's biggest tree is now 25 feet tall and yields an amazing half-ton of fruit every year that is being put to good use.

In Africa, local children delight in eating ice-cold marulas for the fruit's excellent thirst quenching qualities. The adults use it to make a potent home-brewed drink and add it to the local beer.

Once Ketura's marula trees started bearing significant amounts of fruit, Solowey decided that they should try what the Africans had been doing for centuries. So she obtained a secret recipe for making marula liquor from a Russian immigrant woman who worked as a researcher at a nearby institute. The rest, as they say, is history. The Kibbutz now sells the fruit of its marula trees to the regional council which produces and sells the delicious and 100 percent kosher liqueur named "Marula."

Solowey, a mother of six sons, says her new fruit is also an aphrodisiac, but that is yet to be proven scientifically. ☆