

Book Reviews

Lone Voice: The Wars of Isi Leibler. By Suzanne D. Rutland. Hybrid Publishers, Melbourne, 2021. ISBN 9781925736670

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To date, there have been very few life stories of Australian Jewish lay leaders. Michael Gawenda’s recent (2020) contentious biography of Zionist movement leader Mark Leibler is one exception¹, as is the earlier document-based biography of multicultural advocate Walter Lippmann (Markus and Taft (2016). However, past doyens of Australian Jewry such as Maurice Ashkanasy and Syd Einfeld have not attracted significant coverage. Consequently, this detailed biography of the recently deceased Isi Leibler, almost certainly Australian Jewry’s most significant leadership figure and probably the only local Jewish activist to attain a genuinely international profile, is highly welcome.

Although this biography was prepared with the cooperation of the subject, it is not a commissioned or vanity text. Professor Rutland was fortunate enough to attain free access to Isi Leibler’s enormous archival collection, and there is no reason to doubt her assertion that Leibler respected her intellectual freedom and independence. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Rutland held Leibler in high esteem, and at times has arguably been a bit gentle in analysing the contradictions and/or limitations of his public life and policy interventions.

There are a number of major themes in this well researched book. The first is the formative influence of Leibler’s Belgian immigrant origins on his life and activism. Leibler came to Australia with his family at the age of four years in 1939, and his maternal grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. The family were religious Zionists and anti-Communists, and Leibler’s father Roman quickly became active in the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies as an ally of those who wished to marginalize left-wing organisations such as the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Antisemitism (JCCFAS). Leibler shared his father’s conservative politics and was active in the religious Zionist youth group Bnei Akiva and later the National Union of Australasian Jewish Students, but equally developed a rebellious and aggressive approach towards conventional institutions. Rutland notes that Leibler’s confrontational and strident style became a life-long hallmark, and sometimes hindered the successful prosecution of his policy agendas.

An associated theme was Leibler’s engagement with political science scholarship as an Honours student at the University of Melbourne. He was for many years keen on a research and academic career, but this aspiration was undermined by his father’s sudden death in 1957 which forced him to take responsibility for the family business, and later by ongoing business demands. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Leibler’s political science training helped to

inform the effectiveness of his political operations by encouraging him to develop broad-based alliances within and beyond the Jewish community, rather than narrow engagements with ideological fellow travellers.

Rutland deftly covers three of his early political engagements. The first was his connection with conservative anti-Communist intellectuals such as Frank Knopfelmacher and Henry Krygier (both of Eastern European Jewish origin), and prominent Catholic and Democratic Labor Party activist B.A. Santamaria. Through these links, Leibler also became involved with the conservative Australian Association for Cultural Freedom (AACF) which was later revealed to be funded by the CIA. Leibler and his conservative allies were strong supporters of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War which polarized both the general Australian community and indeed Australian Jewry. In fact, Jewish opponents of the war were far more visible, and Leibler was one of the very few mainstream Jewish figures willing to go on the public record as supporting the war (Mendes 1993). Notably, his pro-war views were bluntly expressed in a letter he wrote to the *Australian* newspaper in September 1967 directly attacking leading student anti-war activists of Jewish background such as Doug Kirsner and Albert Langer for allegedly aligning themselves with a pro-Communist movement that was hostile to Israel (Leibler 1967).

A second was his forthright attack on movements of the antisemitic far Right such as Eric Butler's League of Rights (LOR) and various Eastern European émigré groups whose members included some alleged Nazi War criminals. Leibler productively utilized his alliances with key AACF figures such as Krygier, journalist and later Liberal Party politician Peter Coleman and Liberal Party MP William Wentworth to influence mainstream conservatives to distance themselves from the League, and alternatively to discredit those who refused to do so. Leibler also formed discrete associations with anti-fascist progressives such as journalist Ken Gott and academic John Playford. Rutland reveals for the first time that it was Leibler and other Jewish colleagues who funded Gott's highly influential 1965 expose of the LOR titled *Voices of Hate*. Many years later, Leibler worked with equal fervour to combat the far Right Holocaust denier John Bennett, the extreme right Lyndon LaRouche movement, and the ongoing antisemitism emanating from the ageing LOR, as well as presenting a compelling critique of the allegedly antisemitic (and prize winning) novel on Ukrainian-Jewish relations authored by Helen Darville.

A third was his assertive advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry which took two distinct forms. The first was his successful campaign via his connection with conservative politicians to secure a condemnation of Soviet antisemitism both within the Australian Parliament, and later within the global arena of the United Nations. That campaign also further marginalized the pro-Soviet JCCFAS whose former President, Federal Labor Senator Sam Cohen, disturbingly attempted to defend Soviet policies towards its Jewish

population in what became known as the Sam Cohen Affair (Mendes 2000). But in doing so, it provoked open conflict with the Australian Labor Party, the centre-Left party which had long been revered by many Jews for its support of post-war Jewish immigration, and the creation of the State of Israel. Rutland interestingly refers to the document published by Cyril Wyndham, the then Victorian and later Federal ALP secretary, alleging a conspiracy by Leibler and other conservative Jewish leaders to embarrass both Cohen and Labor. It is perhaps not widely known that Wyndham was a British Jew originally called Cyril Isaac who changed his surname due to concerns about potential antisemitism in the Australian labour movement (Scott 2000).

The second component involved a backdoor collusion between Leibler and two leading Australian Communists, Bernie Taft (of German Jewish origin) and Rex Mortimer, to pressure the Soviet Union to change their policies. This strategy which I have called elsewhere a "convergence of political interests" (Mendes 2009) reflected Leibler's shrewd insights into political alliances and power. He understood by the mid 1960s that the presentation of dispassionate facts rather than emotive anti-Soviet propaganda was more likely to convince non-conservatives of the reality of ongoing antisemitism in the Soviet Union, and equally that left-wing advocates for the human rights of Soviet Jewry were more likely than conservatives to influence the views and decisions of Communist leaders. Leibler would later display the same political flexibility in his activism for Soviet Jewry in the 70s and 80s. This pragmatic approach did not always endear him to other conservatives who believed that a purist anti-Communism precluded any deals with the Soviet Union or local Communists. For example, former political ally Frank Knopfelmacher would denounce Leibler bitterly in later years.

A further manifestation of Leibler's Soviet Jewry advocacy was his very public clash at a 1965 World Jewish Congress (WJC) meeting in France with WJC President Nahum Goldmann who favoured quiet diplomacy rather than public disputation with the Soviets. Leibler particularly resented the fact that apologists for Soviet policy would often cite Goldmann either to deny the Soviet Union was anti-Semitic, or alternatively to urge private discreet intercessions. With hindsight, there seems little doubt that Leibler's robust approach had a more significant impact on shifting Soviet policies.

Leibler's vigorous and effective activism for Soviet Jewry is highlighted throughout the text. Some of this narrative overlaps with Rutland's earlier joint book with Sam Lipski (2015). It is a fascinating story of tense meetings with KGB officials, lobbying of Australian Prime Ministers such as Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke and associated Foreign Ministers and parliamentary supporters of Soviet Jewry, liaisons with Australian diplomats, further engagement with sympathetic Australian Communists such as Bernie Taft and John Halfpenny, involvement in global Jewish

debates over whether emigrants should be required to move to Israel rather than alternative destinations, numerous and significantly challenging visits to the Soviet Union, and above all, unconditional friendship and support for the group of refuseniks who sought freedom to emigrate to Israel. It is a story of not only passionate commitment to human rights, but personal courage, given the serious intimidation (e.g. threats by the KGB to charge him with espionage) that Leibler had to overcome in order to achieve his objectives.

Another continuing theme is Leibler's policy activism as a Jewish community leader. Some of the major events covered include his advocacy for Israel during the 1967 war which included lobbying sympathetic groups and individuals on both sides of the political spectrum, his publication of a hasbara text titled *The Case for Israel* in 1972, the conflictual relationship between Leibler and other Jewish leaders and the Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the struggle to combat the far Left attacks on Israel hosted by community radio station 3CR, Leibler's success in persuading the Fraser Coalition Government to contribute Australian troops to join the peace-keeping Multinational Force in the Sinai, the tensions between Jewish bodies and the Coalition government over their criticisms of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the community's engagement with the Nazi War Crimes Bill and associated public controversy, and the strange public clash between Isi as head of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and his younger brother Mark as head of the Zionist movement which can arguably be summed up as much ado about nothing.

Particularly significant was Leibler's founding of the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs (AIJA) which functioned from 1982-1996 as a pluralistic think tank for the sharing of disparate ideas across the Jewish spectrum. Its outstanding contributors included academics such as the politically conservative Professor Bill Rubinstein, educationalist Michael Cohen, and left-leaning former Israeli journalist David Bernstein. Leibler displayed his respect for diverse opinions by consistently defending Bernstein whose dovish two state views upset conservative representatives of the Zionist movement.

One of the more intriguing sections of the book concerns Leibler's early endorsement of the Oslo Peace Accord, and later disillusion. Leibler not only rejected criticisms of the Accord from right-wing Israelis such as Bibi Netyanyahu, but actively engaged with the Palestinian Authority representative within Australia (Ali Kazak who was reputed to privately oppose the PLO's recognition of Israel²) and prominent PLO spokespersons more broadly (e.g. Faisal Hussen, Saeb Erekat and Nabil Shaath) to promote the Accord. He even (reluctantly) accompanied Australian Prime Minister John Howard to a meeting with Yasser Arafat in May 2000.

Rutland says Leibler lost faith in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak who attempted to negotiate a final conflict resolution deal with Arafat at Camp David in July 2000, and actively assisted right-wing Likud leader Ariel

Sharon in his successful 2001 campaign for election as Prime Minister. But it is unclear whether Leibler only became an opponent of Oslo following the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 which revealed that reconciling core Israeli and Palestinian national aspirations might not be possible, or prior to that time. And if the latter, why?

Other sections of the book cover Leibler's business activities including his partnership with leading Bundist Bono Weiner in travel agency Jetset Tours, and his clash with Qantas over ticketing arrangements; his involvement in international Jewish affairs such as his influential endeavours to advance Israel's relations with India and China, and his robust conflicts with the leadership group in the World Jewish Congress; and his decision to make Aliyah in 1997 joining most of his children and other family members in Israel whereas ironically his brother Mark, who unlike Isi headed formal Zionist organisations for many years, elected to remain in Australia.

There are some minor errors and contentious statements in this otherwise meticulously researched book. For example, Dr Moss Cass, a Jewish Minister in the Whitlam Labor Party Government, is described as part of the "anti-Zionist left of the party" (p.213). In fact, Cass was not an anti-Zionist, but rather aligned with the moderate Peace Now movement in Israel. He was a consistent supporter of a two state solution both within the ALP and the Australian Jewish Democratic Society which he headed from approximately 1987-1990 (Mendes 1999).

There is a reference to Labor Party politician Michael Barnard which should probably instead be former Labor Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard (p.221). Michael Barnard was an ultra-right journalist who enjoyed good relations with some Jewish community leaders because of his strong support for Israel, but later lost favour due to his implicit defence of alleged Eastern European Nazi war criminals (Mendes 1989a). John Wheeldon was a Labor Party Senator and Whitlam Government Minister, not a "Liberal parliamentarian" (p.225). Ultra-conservative journalist Frank Divine who attacked Isi Leibler's justified critique of Helen Darville (p.532) should be spelt Devine. Michael Danby was elected to Parliament as the Labor Party MP for Melbourne Ports in 1998, not 1997 (p.549).

Rutland calls the JCCFAS a "Communist front organisation" on two occasions (pp.79 and 152). This was Isi Leibler's personal view due to the Council's public denial of Soviet antisemitism during the Cold War. But a more nuanced analysis would suggest that the Council was broadly pro-Soviet rather than a formal Communist front group, as the Council's pro-Zionist and pro-Israel viewpoint contrasted sharply with the pro-Arab policies pursued by the Soviet Union (Mendes 2003). In fact, Rutland has argued elsewhere that the Communist front label was "simplistic and ignores the historical dynamics of the period. Most Council members were Left-liberal supporters rather than Communists" (Rutland 1997: 335).

The conflict between Leibler's AIJA and Michael Danby's Australian-Israel Publications (AIP) was not because Danby was aligned with the Labor Party and the AIJA was "more conservative-leaning" (p.345). If anything, the reverse was partly true. Danby and his co-editor at AIP, Dr Colin Rubenstein (an active Liberal Party member at the time), were strongly aligned with conservative anti-Communist groups, whereas the AIJA was more willing to flexibly engage with an ideologically diverse range of organisations and individuals within and beyond the Jewish community to advance Jewish interests. Regardless as noted by Rutland, Leibler and Danby later reconciled resulting in Leibler employing Danby in roles at both the ECAJ and Jetset.

I also thought the discussion of Leibler's argument with then Labor Party leader Bill Hayden over his meeting with PLO leader Yasser Arafat in July 1980 (pp.312 & 315) needed more nuance and context. A number of Western social democratic parties began to revise their traditional pro-Israel positions and commenced forms of dialogue with the PLO during this period (for example, the British Labour Party, see Edmunds 2000). One of the ironies of the fallout between Leibler and Hayden is that I understand (from a personal conversation that I had many years ago with Moss Cass) that Hayden found Arafat highly frustrating. He asked him a number of times under what conditions the PLO would recognize Israel, but never got a convincing answer. Rutland briefly confirms this interpretation of the outcome of this meeting on p. 315. It was understandable that the Jewish community would have preferred Labor not to talk to the PLO short of the PLO formally recognising Israel's existence, but it was completely inaccurate for Leibler to assert that Hayden and the ALP were "supportive of the PLO" (p.312). Rather, they were seeking to advance a balanced two-state position that attempted to reconcile both Israeli and Palestinian national rights. This was also the long-term position of Leibler's long-time friend Bob Hawke dating back to 1979 as noted by Rutland on page 273, and repeated with some controversy at the Australian welcoming ceremony for the visiting refuseniks in May 1988.

Finally, the discussion of Leibler's relations with the left-wing Australian Jewish Democratic Society (AJDS) in the 1980s and 90s deserved more detail than a short endnote (see p.368). The fact is that Leibler consistently supported the inclusion of AJDS in leadership bodies such as the Jewish Community Council of Victoria in the belief that the community should utilize the skills and resources of all sections of the political spectrum. To be sure, this tolerance was not without qualification.

In an interview with this author for the inaugural edition of the *Australian Jewish Democrat* journal, he stated:

"Involvement in the mainstream means greater responsibilities and greater responsibility means less

freedom of total action and independence. Because, if you are going to become part of the total Jewish community, you have to impose upon yourself certain disciplines. Some of these disciplines may require an end to the sort of formal agitation on the particular viewpoints that you have on Israel in the wider arena. One can't be part of the total Jewish community and not accept a few norms that are acceptable to the community as a whole” (Mendes 1989b: 3).

In short, Leibler seemed to reasonably be arguing that the Jewish community would benefit from the participation of Jewish-committed left-wing groups and individuals, but they might have to accept the role of a loyal internal opposition on issues such as Israel where their viewpoints were clearly in a minority.

Rutland mentions that Leibler later regretted his constructive engagement with AJDS given the organisations gradual shift after the collapse of the Oslo Accord in late 2000 to a harsher pro-Palestinian and eventual anti-Zionist position.³ But his regrets arguably went further than that. In the post-2000 period, Leibler seemed to abandon his earlier nuanced recognition of the differences between moderate and far Left Jews, and his assertion that the former group should be welcomed into Jewish leadership ranks. Indeed, many of his later polemics targeted not Jewish anti-Zionists, but moderate Left groups such as J Street in the USA that still favoured a two state solution (Leibler 2009; 2010; 2013).⁴ It remains unclear what factors drove this angry reversal of Leibler's earlier tolerance for a plurality of perspectives.

Notwithstanding some minor quibbles, this is an outstanding book which sets a very high bar for future Australian Jewish biographers. It is delightfully structured, presents a consistent and coherent narrative, and deserves a large audience both local and global. It clearly presents the importance of a leader of a small religious minority (particularly within Australia) who understood the value of the effective use of political power, and conversely the adverse consequences of powerlessness. Whether readers agree with Leibler's (sometimes dogmatic) views or not, there is no doubt that he never sat passively when it came to defending Jewish rights and concerns anywhere in the world.

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Endnotes

1. For an analysis of some methodological limitations in the Gawenda book, see Mendes 2020.
2. Following the collapse of the Oslo Accord, Kazak reverted back to his earlier harsh opposition to Israel, arguing that the Jewish state should be replaced by an Arab state of Greater Palestine. See Kazak 2020. He also argued incredulously that there was never any convergence between forms of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. See Kazak 2005, and response by Mendes 2005.
3. On that dramatic ideological shift within AJDS, see Mendes 2016.
4. For further discussion, see Mendes 2014: 281.