

Doug Holder

The Interview

Ada Aharoni: An Israeli scholar of literature and peace

In December of 2007 I was a guest of the Voices Israel literary organization. I toured Israel, ran a number of workshops, and gave readings in such cities as Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. One of the many interesting people that I met was Dr. Ada Aharoni. Aharoni in spite of her many accomplishments is an unaffected, and accessible personality. She is a published poet, peace activist, university lecturer, literary critic and founder of: IFLAC: The International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace. Aharoni is a noted Saul Bellow scholar and has a new critical study published, titled: "Inner Voice of Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow." I asked Aharoni if could interview her and she generously agreed.

Doug Holder: You are the founder of IFLAC (The International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace.) You believe through cultural exchange, and cultural understanding, we can bridge the gaps and stem the conflict between Arab and Jews. Is this an accurate description of your mission statement?

Ada Aharoni: Our mission at "IFLAC: The International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace", is more global. We believe that all conflicts can be alleviated if the sides know and understand each other better, through bridges of culture and literature. Our culture is at the basis of our identity, and in a long and tragic conflict like the Arab - Israeli one, the wounds are very deep, on both sides, and to heal them we need a vehicle that can go that deep, and the most appropriate ones are Poetry, Literature and Culture. IFLAC, unfortunately cannot "stem the conflict between Arab and Jews," as it is also a concrete question of land, water, and a Palestinian State living and flourishing in peace by the side of Israel, but IFLAC can indeed contribute to the creation of a peace culture atmosphere that can facilitate the negotiations toward peace in our region.

More about this and the additional questions below can be found on our

IFLAC sites: www.iflac.com and www.iflac.com/ada

DH: You have written about a global TV network to foster cultural understanding. So you are in Marshall McLuhan's camp "the medium is the message?"

AA: I don't know if I am in Marshall McLuhan's camp, however, I strongly believe in the power of the Media to spread a peace culture instead of the widespread current culture of violence. Unfortunately, global Media, and especially TV, are daily full of the culture of violence. Murder and homicide are only a very small part of our lives, so why should they fill most of the programs we are offered on TV? Our IFLAC Project for the WSPC: World TV Satellite for the Culture of Peace, will reflect the real problems and situations we find ourselves in, and will offer solutions to solve them, through beautiful, exciting and constructive films, dialogues of writers, poets, women, mothers, and children, on both sides of conflicts, such as the Palestinian and Israeli one. Excellent professional moderators will guide the large public toward the creation of a better world beyond war, terror and conflict. In addition we will have a fully-fledged university of the air to spread the required new peace culture, which would cover all subjects from the point of view of peace among nations, and will include all the arts, music and dance, etc. As to the coverage of politics and daily News about wars and conflicts, they will be shown through mothers' eyes, on both sides of the conflicts. However, to start this stupendous project, we need like-minded sponsors, and the support of the UN, UNESCO and the World Bank, that would understand, we hope, that the WSPC is an urgent and crucial preventive medicine, before an additional September 11. As Nobel Peace Laureate Eli Wiesel said: "We are the stories we have heard and the stories we tell!" And this is why the stories we tell should be constructive and beautiful ones.

DH: You are fluent in many different languages. I have read that Hebrew is the most difficult for you. Why?

AA: I was born in the multicultural Jewish Community in Egypt, and went to an English school. My mother tongue is French, my cultural tongue is English, but I did not know any Hebrew then. I got my

Cambridge Certificate at the age of 16 in Egypt, at the English Alvernia School, in Zamalek, as I jumped two classes. When we were thrown out of Egypt in 1949, because we were Jews, my family remained in France, but I wanted to be part of the pioneering experience in our new State of Israel. I joined the Kibbutz Ein Shemer, in Israel, and quickly learned how to speak Hebrew. However, I did not know how to write or read it. After I left the kibbutz, and my two children were born, it took me many years as an auto-didact to learn how to write Hebrew, so most of my 26 books to date, I wrote first in English, and then with the passing years, translated them myself into Hebrew. Today, at last, writing in Hebrew is not a problem anymore, and I have just published my second book on Saul Bellow in Hebrew, titled: THE INNER VOICE OF NOBEL LAUREATE SAUL BELLOW.

DH: You are a scholar of Saul Bellow and his work. You co-wrote: "Saul Bellow: A Mosaic" and authored the newly released " Inner Voice of Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow." How did you first meet Bellow? Your impressions?

AA: When I completed my M.Phil Thesis on Henry Fielding, at the University of London (Birkbeck College), I read Saul Bellow's masterpiece HERZOG, and was fascinated by it, to the point that I told my Professor, Geoffrey Tillotson, that I wanted to do my PhD on Saul Bellow's works. I got a response that was quite amazing:" "But Saul Bellow is alive! And at the University of London you don't research a writer who is still alive." (This was in 1967). As I was so adamant to work for my PhD on Saul Bellow, we left London after three wonderful years, and returned to Israel. I completed my Ph.D. at the Hebrew University on "Saul Bellow's Introspective Novels," in 1975, a year before he got the Nobel Prize. In 1987, together with the writer A.B. Yehoshua, we organized "The First World Congress on Saul Bellow" and Saul Bellow came to Haifa University, and was with us for a whole week. The Congress was a great success and Saul Bellow enjoyed the deep inspections of his novels by the various world famous literary critics that came to the congress from all around the world. Our book "Saul Bellow: A Mosaic" (Peter Lang, New York, 1992), covers the proceedings of this eventful congress, and it includes important articles as that of Amos Oz and others. My impressions of Saul Bellow is that he was a very

intelligent and perceiving man, and I was so glad that he loved my work and research on his novels. Some colleagues thought him to be somewhat cold and distant, however, they were all charmed by him, and by his Keynote Lecture at the Congress in his honor, which I had the great pleasure of initiating and organizing.

DH: What was the "inner voice" that drove him to literary heights?

AA: This is a long question with which I deal with in depth in my two books on Saul Bellow's works, and it is hard to condense the answer in such a small space. I have also published an article together with Ann Weinstein from Canada, which touches on some aspects of this question in "Studies in American Jewish Literature," (Vol. 25, edited by Daniel Walden and Evelyn Avery), entitled: "Memorial: Judaism as Reflected in the Works of Saul Bellow."

In my view, his inner voice that drove him to literary heights is first and foremost his unwavering humanism, and his love of freedom. Most of Bellow's protagonists are concerned with the freedom of choice, social responsibility, the preservation of human dignity and individuality, and a staunch belief in the possibility of change. In *Henderson the Rain King*, for instance, the protagonist clearly expresses this idea when he exclaims: "What Homo Sapiens imagines, he may slowly convert himself to be." Another aspect is his love of peace. Bellow's deep sympathy to Israel and concern for her safety is the main theme of his book, *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976), which is Bellow's only book written in a journalistic style. His yearning for peace in the Middle East permeates the book in a most intelligent way. At one central point, arguing with a hostile interlocutor who states that bombs are planted everywhere in the world and not only in Israel. Bellow retorts that there is a great difference between planting a terrorist bomb in Jerusalem or in London. The bomb in Jerusalem is a declaration that Israel should not exist - while planting a bomb in London implies no such genocidal intention.

In my interview with Saul Bellow (published in the IFLAC Peace Culture Literary Magazine GALIM 9, December 2000), Bellow said: "I certainly wish for peace between Israel and the Arabs. But I am certainly not in a position to tell Israel what the peace terms should be. However, some

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facts are obvious: the political disequilibria, the comparative birthrate between Jews and Arabs - these are sure signs that steps should be taken to stop the conflict. And the quicker the better. My priorities are that the State of Israel should continue to exist and flourish. Therefore my preferences are for a peace that would assure the survival of the Jewish State as such, and as a sanctuary for Jews everywhere. Whether in America or in Israel, I am part of the Jewish people."

In true humanistic tradition, throughout his writings, Bellow struggled against the isolating and destructive forces of defeatism and nihilism, and towards the attainment of meaning, fullness, and spiritual richness in life. In so doing, he has indeed significantly enriched Jewish-American literature and world literature, as well as us his readers, by making us more aware of the world we live in and by making us more thoughtful and better people. This was part of the secret of his inner voice that drove him to literary heights. I personally owe very much to Saul Bellow and my founding of IFLAC was certainly influenced by his humane values and rich inner voice. May he rest in peace.

DH: Many of his women characters in his novels struggle to have a voice. The men seem to be treated in a more egalitarian fashion. As a woman and an activist, how do you feel about his portrayal of women? Was he accurately displaying the zeitgeist, the milieu?

AA: Yes, you are certainly right, he was accurately displaying the zeitgeist of his milieu, where women are seen and treated as secondary citizens. However, in addition, he seems to have understood men better than women. The proof is that he was married five times! When I asked him at the Congress, why does he never portray a woman heroine and all his heroes are men, he answered that his next book "Theft" will have a heroine as the protagonist. Unfortunately Clara is not comparable to any of his male protagonists, she is pale and not rounded enough, and we cannot identify with her as we do with Asa in *THE VICTIM*, Tommy in *SEIZE THE DAY*, Herzog, Sammler, or Dean Corde. This lack of a full and deep understanding of women, however, does not impede on the fact that Saul Bellow is indeed a great writer.

DH: In our conversations you have talked about Isaac Singer and his

kind, and avuncular manner, as opposed to Harold Bloom, whom you were less impressed with. Can you elaborate about these men?

AA: I love the books of Isaac Bashevis Singer, especially his wonderful novel "THE SLAVE." I met Singer when I had the great pleasure of sharing a platform with him at the Hebrew University, on the occasion of the official receiving of my Doctorate on Saul Bellow. On that same occasion, Singer received an Honorary Doctorate from the Hebrew University. When I asked him why did he not write in English? He answered whimsically: "Yiddish is my mother, and you don't forget your mother, even when she is dead!" One of the beautiful phrases he used in his lecture, and which I dearly cherish, was: " In Literature - as in dreams, there is no death."

In comparison, Harold Bloom, who came to the Saul Bellow International Congress in Haifa, struck me as an egocentric, snobbish and vain man. He was very friendly with Saul Bellow then, who brought him to the Congress, but I was not surprised when this close friendship came apart, as reflected in Saul Bellow's last book.

DH: Can you talk about your own poetry?

AA: Poetry for me is the mirror of my life, thoughts and emotions. I have published several poetry collections in English, my favorites are: FROM THE PYRAMIDS TO MOUNT CARMEL, PEACE POEMS, YOU AND I CAN CHANGE THE WORLD, and THE POMEGRANATE. All my books are available on www.iflac.com/ada jointly with www.amazon.com my poems have been anthologized in several anthologies.

I am especially proud of is: POEMS FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW (Penguin, London). My poems have been translated into seventeen languages and have appeared in magazines in many countries. Several of my poems have been put to music, and I have released two discs of poems sung by major singers in Israel and abroad, the first one is: "A GREEN WEEK," and the second one, released this month is: "To Haim - To Life: LOVE POEMS".

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DH: Many people claim poetry has not effect in the dog eat dog world. Do you think it can be a catalyst for change?

AA: I think I have already answered part of this question in my answer to one of the first questions above. Yes I think, that despite of the dog eat dog world we often witness, beautiful, strong, true and influential Poetry can indeed be a catalyst for change, if it succeeds to reach the wide public. The Peace Culture TV can help to spread good, lovely and inspiring poetry to the wide public. May it Be!

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