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Café Scheherazade in Melbourne as a Haven for Holocaust Survivors

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Abstract

Masha Frydman and Avram Zeleznikow were Holocaust survivors, who met at the University of Lodz, Poland, in 1946. As Bundists, their then goal was to graduate and remain in Poland, building a Jewish life. Pogroms in Kielce and Polish post-war antisemitism, together with the inevitable coming of a communist regime, made potential life in Poland unbearable. So, separately, they fled to Paris, where they supposedly reunited at the Scheherazade nightclub—a then haven for eastern European émigrés. As penniless refugees in Paris, with a young child, they were in transition, waiting for some country to sponsor them. Then, a place at the end of the world—Australia—gave them succour. But, while they were allowed residency, they had to provide their own food and accommodation. They had few skills and zero qualifications. After arriving in Melbourne, for seven years, Avram worked as a labourer, and Masha cared for a sick child. Then, Masha had a bright idea—to open a café. With the help of a loan from the Australian Jewish Welfare and Relief Society, they bought a milk-bar in Acland Street, St. Kilda, and converted it into a café with an espresso machine, offering central and eastern European food. It was open 15 hours a day. The café became a haven for Holocaust survivors, offering not only food, but also solace for its clients. In this paper, I discuss the Melbourne Jewish community of the day, the operation of the café, and how Melbourne benefitted from its services.

Keywords: Melbourne Jewry, refugees, cafés as cultural havens.

Introduction

Services for culturally and linguistically diverse communities have generally been provided by not-for-profit organisations, often financially supported by governments, and sometimes by governments themselves.[1] The provision of such services by for-profit companies is far rarer. In this article, I discuss the operation of a café/restaurant that for 38 years, amongst other things, catered for the needs of the Jewish community of Melbourne, Australia. Masha and Avram Zeleznikow, both Holocaust survivors, ran Café Scheherazade at 99 Acland Street, St. Kilda, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, from May 1958 until September 1996. While the café's primary

focus was to provide an income for its owners, it also provided sustenance for Holocaust survivors and their families. For their work, the Zeleznikows were rewarded both financially and with community and government honours. In this article, I discuss their backgrounds, their life during the Holocaust, their emigration to Melbourne, their life in Scheherazade, and their final years post Scheherazade.

Café Scheherazade has received much publicity, as the subject of journalistic, creative, and academic writing alike. Zable's (2001) *Café Scheherazade* (Zable 2001), a work of 'faction', is a combination of fiction and accurate historical details. The characters of Masha and Avram Zeleznikow were accurately described in the book, while the other characters in the book were composites of Scheherazade customers. Zable has a renowned history as a social activist and is patron and ambassador-at-large of PEN Melbourne.[2] His book discusses the experiences of Masha and Avram, as well as the composite characters, during the Holocaust, and their life in Melbourne, post Holocaust, where they spent much time in Café Scheherazade. Zable wanted to stress how Australian First Nations people had been similarly oppressed to Jews; they were incarcerated and attempts made to extinguish their culture and identity. The book was number one on the Australian bestsellers' list for ten weeks in 2001. It was initially classified as fiction, but was eventually reclassified as non-fiction (Text Publishing n.d.). Still in print today, 21 years later, the book was adapted into a play by Thérèse Radic (Radic 2011). While considerably shorter than the book, the play, *Café Scheherazade*, remains faithful to the book. It premiered to a sold-out season at fortyfivedownstairs in March and April 2011, and a reprisal in August and September 2011 was also sold out (fortyfivedownstairs n.d.). Writing on *Australian Stage*, Dione Joseph says:

> Loosely based on Arnold Zable's novel by the same name Therese Radic has created, *"not an adaptation but a play based on that epic piece of Australian literature"*[3] and draws upon the experiences and memories of the owners Avram Zeleznikow and Masha Frydman as they brought their business, culinary and life skills to a cafe in Melbourne that warmed its patrons with more than just food. (Joseph 2011)

A previous article (Zeleznikow 2010) discusses the life of Avram Zeleznikow. The paper emphasises how, after being a highly valued partisan during the Holocaust, the final 62 years of his life were peaceful and serene, but also an anti-climax. In a booklet about Café Scheherazade after 35 years (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow 1992), a potted history of the restaurant is given. In the booklet, one can find photos, drawings, letters, copies of documents, and menus. There were also numerous newspaper articles about the café.[4] The present article adds to extant knowledge by locating the café in its historical and geographical context, by the new exploration of the background and contribution of Masha, and by the new consideration of the

café as a locus of support for its customers, where their emotional needs could also be met.

This article focuses on three major themes: (a) the lives of Holocaust survivors and Café Scheherazade owners, Avram and Masha Zeleznikow; (b) the Melbourne Jewish community; and (c) how Café Scheherazade became an iconic Melbourne café and provided sustenance and companionship for Holocaust survivors and their families. While many published sources were used in preparation of this article, the work is primarily based on family knowledge, including personal experience and reflections and oral history. Where such evidence is publicly available, it has been cited, but many of the sources are unavailable to other researchers, as the recorded testimonies in library holdings do not cover exactly the same subject matter. While Avram and Masha Zeleznikow made many recordings for Yad Vashem, the US Holocaust Museum, and the Fortunoff Library at Yale University, these recordings are focussed upon their experiences in the Holocaust. The author of this article has made recordings with Richard Fidler and with the Yiddish Book Center (Amherst, MA). Additionally, a collection of artefacts from the café are held by the Melbourne Holocaust Museum—these are displayed in a space dedicated to Avram and Masha and their café, in the museum's permanent exhibition, *Everybody Had a Name: A History of the Holocaust*.

As a declaration of bias, I note I am the son of Masha and Avram Zeleznikow. I lived above the café for 11 months (May 1958-April 1959), worked in the café during school and university holidays, initially performing labour tasks. From 1966-72 I worked behind the bar making coffee and cold drinks and running the cash register, ate in the café, and mingled with the customers.

The Frydman and Zeleznikow families in Eastern Europe and France

Avram and Masha met as university students in post-war Poland. A Parisian nightclub which was a haven for them while en route to Australia would give its name to the business which became a haven for so many in Melbourne.

Avram Zeleznikow was born in Vilna, then Poland,[5] on 24 May 1924.[6] His father, Yankl, born in Pinsk, Byelorussia, in 1891, was a Bund activist, trade union leader, and member of the Jewish Council in Vilna. Avram's mother, Etta Sztok, born in Tulchin, Ukraine, in 1881, was a midwife and ran an orphanage. She had worked in a factory with Joseph Stalin, and was on the shore in Odessa, Ukraine, during the Battleship Potemkin incident in 1905. Etta and Yankl met when Yankl was sent as a Bund emissary to Odessa. Yankl and his brother, Shloime, were involved in the death of a Czarist agent provocateur in 1906. Shloime fled to New York, whilst Yankl was imprisoned in Siberia. Etta joined Yankl in Siberia, where they had a daughter, Batia, born in 1911. During the Russian Revolution of

1917, Yankl was released from prison and fled to Vilna, Poland, to avoid being in a Bolshevik-controlled area. Avram attended Yiddish schools in Vilna, and had a very close relationship with his father, who was his primary carer. Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, Soviet troops entered Vilna in September 1939. Yankl was arrested by the Soviet troops and was never seen again. As part of Operation Barbarossa, on 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded Eastern Poland and Lithuania. In September 1941, the Nazi authorities forced the Jews of Vilna into a ghetto. In the ghetto, Avram worked for Johannes Pohl in the Rosenberg Institute for Research into the Jewish Question (Matthäus 2019).[7] Secretly, during this time he was part of a group known as the Paper Brigade, which worked to rescue rare Jewish books and documents.[8] Avram's role was to collect books. He was also youth leader of the Fighting Partisans Organisation. On 23 September 1943, when the Nazis commenced the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, Avram escaped by cutting a hole in the floor of the house with cutlery and then crawling through the sewers to the Rudniki Forest. For 14 months, he served with Abba Kovner's Death to Fascism group until freed by Soviet troops in October 1944. He was involved in the resistance effort by blowing up bridges in an attempt to stop the Nazis' terror campaign. Avram was recognised as a war hero for his efforts. Avram's mother, sister Batia, brother-in-law, and their children Shmulik and Neham were murdered at Ponary following the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto on 23 September 1943.

Masha Frydman was born in Sosnowicz, western Poland, on 22 October 1926. Her father, Josef Frydman, born in Siedlce, Poland, in 1901, was a shoemaker and businessman. Her mother, Jocheved Skolimowicz, born in 1902 in Losisc, performed home duties. Josef was a committed Bundist, but not active in the party. Jocheved came from an observant religious background. Masha went to Bet Sarah, a religious Jewish school. Soon after the Germans invaded Poland, on 1 September 1939, the Frydman Family—father, mother, Masha, her brother Lonka, and her sister Sala—fled east. They crossed the Bug River into the Soviet Union on 1 January 1940. As enemy aliens, they were exiled to Siberia. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Frydmans were no longer considered to be enemy aliens, and were allowed to travel by cattle train to Kazakhstan, where they spent the remaining war years. In Kazakhstan, Masha went to school and helped her father with his business ventures. The Frydman family returned to Katowice, adjacent to Sosnowicz, in May 1945. Later that year, Masha commenced studying medicine at the University of Lodz. Whilst she did not consider herself a Holocaust survivor, she certainly was.[9] At the University of Lodz, Masha met Avram Zeleznikow, who had commenced studying history and pedagogy with the goal of becoming a Yiddish teacher. Both lived in student accommodation at the University of Lodz. They soon became a couple.

As Poland was coming under communist control, Avram and Masha decided to emigrate. While Masha's immediate family had remained intact, Avram was all alone. His father's demise at the hands of the USSR government, and the fact that he had fled the Soviet Union, where he was viewed as a Soviet citizen and a deserter from the Soviet Army, meant he was very wary about a potential communist government in Poland. Masha's father was also wary of an imminent communist Polish government. Despite being a Bundist, Avram wanted to join his partisan colleagues in Israel—fighting with the Haganah. But, Masha's father wanted to get as far away from conflict as possible. So, travelling separately, the Frydmans and Avram went to Paris—the Frydmans legally and Avram illegally.

Avram and Masha agreed that when they both eventually reached Paris, they would find each other at a specific location, which was a known meeting place for émigrés. In a novel by Erich Maria Remarque, called *Arc de Triomphe* (Remarque 1945), Avram, Masha, and their friends had read about stateless people and a cabaret nightclub in Paris called Scheherazade, where émigrés could meet, at 3 rue de Liege, in the Montmartre district. In the novel, the Scheherazade nightclub was decorated like a Caucasian tent. The waiters were Russians in red Circassian uniforms. The orchestra was composed of Russian and Romanian gypsies. People sat at small tables with plate-glass tops illuminated from below. The place was dim and quite crowded. According to Leonid Livak,[10] it opened its doors on 3 December 1927 and was owned by Aleksei Ippolitovich Nagornov, a former Russian Army officer turned entrepreneur.[11] Nagornov named the establishment after Michel Fokine's famous Ballets Russes production *Scheherazade*. Boris Bilinskii decorated the place, closely following the ballet's original decorations in the World of Art style. The Cabaret Scheherazade quickly became one of the most famous Russian nightclubs in Paris. The cabaret closed in 1946, probably because of Nagornov's troubles with the law—he was investigated, although not prosecuted, on the suspicion of collaboration, since the cabaret had actively catered to German troops and French collaborators during the occupation. New owners largely preserved the décor, because it was the source of the venue's fame. The newly reopened cabaret, under its new name, capitalised on the fame of its predecessor and advertised itself as the Scheherazade. Masha and Avram, being in Lodz and only knowing of Scheherazade from Remarque's book, did not know that Scheherazade had been shut down and had then gone through multiple changes of ownership after the liberation of Paris. But, this is where they met in 1948, spending their evening fondling a cheap bottle of champagne. Today, the site remains empty (Figure 1).

Avram, Masha, and the Frydmans lived in Paris, while waiting for visas that would enable them to settle outside of Europe. Avram worked caring for and educating Jewish children. Avram and Masha lived in what is now an Algerian neighbourhood, at 3 rue Houdart, Paris 20e, near the Père

Lachaise Cemetery. They were married on 22 October 1949, and had a son, Yankl (later John), in 1950. Sadly, Masha's mother died in hospital, having a hysterectomy, in 1949. As refugees living in Paris, the Zeleznikow/Frydman family anxiously awaited visas—from Canada, USA, and Australia. Eventually, they received visas from Australia. With financial support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and sponsorship from Yaacov Waks, a Bundist leader in Melbourne, the family (Masha, Avram, Josef, Lonka, and Sala) left Genoa, Italy, for Melbourne on 21 February 1951. They had an arduous trip on the Italian ship, *Protea*.[12]

Figure 1: Outside the building at 3 rue de Liege, Paris, on 30 December 2022. Source credit: Photo by author.

Melbourne Jewry

Arriving in Melbourne, the Zeleznikow/Frydman family found a growing Jewish community with some diversity, despite the restrictive effects of both Australian government policy and decision-making in local community bodies.

In writing about the demography of the Melbourne Jewish community, Walter Lippmann notes that the Melbourne Jewish community was miniscule in the 1830s and grew rapidly in the era of discovery of gold in the 1850s (Lippmann 1973). By 1871, there were 3,500 Jews in

Melbourne, a figure which had risen to 6,500 by 1891. Immigration slowed after World War One, with 7,600 Jews in Melbourne in 1921, and 9,500 in 1931. When Hitler assumed power in 1933, the Australian Jewish community numbered only 23,000 persons. This small, entrenched, well-respected Anglo-Jewish minority was mainly concentrated in the urban centres of Sydney and Melbourne. The community was largely Australian born, and strove for full acceptance within the majority non-Jewish population. They wanted to be 'more British than the British'. Despite the antisemitic measures of the German Nazi government, from 30 January 1933 onwards it was difficult for Jews to immigrate to Australia. As Tom White, the Minister for Trade and Customs, said in July 1938, when he represented Australia at the inter-governmental conference on Jewish refugees held in Évian, France, 'As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign migration' (Rickard 2002).

Between 1933 and 1940, about 9,000 European Jewish refugees arrived in Australia. They were reinforced by a further 25,000 Jewish migrants after the war, so that by 1960, Australia's small Jewish community would almost triple in size, to 61,000. The established Anglo-Jews were faced with the challenge of absorbing these newcomers and ensuring that they did not become charges on the state and a drain on government funds. At the government's urging, the Australian Jewish Welfare Society (AJWS) was established in 1937, led by conservative Anglo-Jews who were concerned not to create waves and were even more stringent than the government in following immigration policy. After the war, the United Jewish Overseas Relief Fund (UJORF), established in 1942 to assist European Jewry, took over the leadership of the Melbourne branch of the AJWS, headed by Leo Fink, and renamed the organisation the Australian Jewish Welfare and Relief Society (AJWRS). Rutland writes,

> [The AJWRS] was prepared to bend the rules, unlike its more conservative Sydney counterpart, resulting in conflict between the two centres, but as a result Melbourne attracted 60 per cent of the Holocaust survivors; Sydney attracted less than 40 per cent, with a small number settling in the other capital cities. (Rutland 2010, 36)

Under strong pressure by conservative elements opposed to Jewish migration to Australia, in 1946, the Labor Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, decreed that no ship bringing migrants to Australia could have more than 25 per cent of Jewish passengers on board, and the responsibility for monitoring this was placed on the shoulders of the Jewish welfare organisations. This quota caused great hardship for the JDC and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which experienced difficulties filling the ships they chartered with 75 percent non-Jewish passengers. When the JDC tried to bypass this quota by chartering planes to take Jewish survivors to Australia, Calwell responded by imposing a 25-percent quota on planes as

well. In January 1949, a 'gentleman's agreement' was reached with the Federation of Australian Jewish Welfare Societies (FAJWS), allowing the quota to increase to 50 percent, with the proviso that no more than 3,000 Jewish survivors would arrive each year, sponsored by the Jewish community. Rutland writes that, from 1945 to 1961, around 25,000 Jewish displaced persons migrated to Australia (Rutland 2010, 33). As a result of anti-refugee hysteria against Jewish migrants, Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, insisted that the reception and integration of the refugees was the responsibility of the Jewish community. This period marked the beginning of a partnership between Australian and American Jewry in the resettlement task. The Jewish community of Melbourne changed drastically after the Holocaust).[13] This led to much rivalry in communal bodies. The large influx of Holocaust survivors changed the community. Rutland states that Melbourne became a centre of the national Jewish political life characteristic of Jewish communities in eastern Europe, owing largely to the high proportion of Polish Jews who settled in Melbourne, compared to the largely central and western European Jews who moved to Sydney (Rutland 2008, 141). Representative of this fact, although Scheherazade's Holocaust survivor customers were primarily Polish Jews, Sydney in the 1950s had two iconic cafes that were operated by Hungarian Jews: 'The Gelato Bar' at Bondi Beach and 'Twenty-One' in Double Bay. Both Sydney cafes, like Scheherazade, opened in 1958.

The communal bodies of pre-1939 Australia had been primarily led by Anglo Jews.[14] These Jews of an Anglo background were largely anti-Zionist, whereas the newer eastern European migrants were strong supporters of Zionism. While the Bund in Melbourne was vocal and non-Zionist, David Slucki notes that at the 1960 election for the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, the Bund could only muster 324 votes (Slucki 2008, 216). Medding says those opposed to what they called 'political Zionism' were Sir Isaac Isaacs, attorney-general and the first Australian-born governor-general, together with the established lay and rabbinical leaders of the Melbourne and Sydney Jewish communities (Medding 2006, 107). These were socially well-integrated patricians, prominent in various walks of Australian life, such as Sir Archie Michaelis and Sir Samuel Cohen, and Rabbis Jacob Danglow and F. L. Cohen. Hitherto, this group had been virtually unchallenged in its leadership of the Sydney and Melbourne Jewish communities' major representative bodies, which, following the British model, had grown out of and were effectively controlled by the major Orthodox congregations and were known at the time as Boards of Deputies. There were over 14,000 Jews in Melbourne in 1947. This was the community that Avram and Masha Zeleznikow entered in June 1951.

The establishment of the cafe

On arrival in Melbourne, Avram immediately became involved in Yiddish Melbourne,[15] but the family struggled financially until a business opportunity presented itself.

Avram travelled 12 km each Sunday morning, to teach at Sholem Aleichem School. He very soon became an executive member of Kadimah, the Yiddish Cultural Centre. In an interview in Yiddish with Danielle Charak and Miriam Munz,[16] Avram recounts his early days in Melbourne:

> The *Hilfsfund* [AJWRS] met us and took us to Camberwell where there was a house for immigrants. We had no language, no profession. We were university students. We asked Waks, "Can we study?" He answered, "Here you don't need to study. Go and work. It'll be best." At the beginning of the 1950s, there was great prosperity in Australia, no unemployment and plenty of work. I began to make shirts, but I have two left hands and I just couldn't. We moved to a room in Thornbury and then borrowed money from Jewish Welfare and rented a little flat in Brunswick with key money. I worked for Smorgons in the meat works for a while and then in Finks factory.[17] I did whatever I could. (Monash University 2008)

At that time, Avram spoke minimal English. He resumed his involvement in communal activities, getting involved with the New Australian Council branch of the Australian Labor Party with Bono Wiener, who became a close friend. Avram and Masha had a very limited income and a very uncertain future. For seven years, Masha and Avram struggled financially. There were limited opportunities in 1950s Melbourne for Yiddish teachers and people who had half-completed medical degrees. Plus, Masha was caring for a sick child—I was hospitalised for three years with polio—and two new babies: Janet, born in 1956, and Barbara, born in early 1960. But, things changed. By the late 1950s, the Jewish community of Melbourne, originally based in the Inner North—Carlton, Brunswick, and Moreland, was already established in the Inner South—St. Kilda, Elwood, and Caulfield. As Avram states in his Monash University interview,

> We looked for a business and settled on a chocolate factory in Acland Street, St. Kilda. At that time, you needed a licence to sell chocolate, and the tenants at 99 Acland St had one. We borrowed the money and made it into a milk bar. (Monash University 2008)

The property at 99 Acland Street, St. Kilda, was then known as O'Shea's Milk Bar. With the assistance of a loan from the AJWRS, Avram and Masha opened the Scheherazade Café and Restaurant on these premises. The family needed a secure source of income, and, at the same time, Masha could see a need for services for survivors and their families. The new café could cater to all of these needs.

The café opened on 25 May 1958. Previously, the lease on 99 Acland Street, St. Kilda, had been owned by Masha's brother, Lonka (Leo). They

Figure 2: Avram Zeleznikow behind the counter of Café Scheherazade in 1962, with some retail items visible. Source credit: Reproduced by permission from the Estate of Masha Zeleznikow.

managed to buy the freehold in 1961. Next door, at 101 Acland Street, was Birner's Delicatessen, which was owned by Lonka's parents-in-law. The iconic Monarch Cake Shop, which is still operational, was at 103 Acland Street. During the early days of Café Scheherazade's operation, the cakes served in the cafe were bought at the Monarch cake shop. During these formative times, Scheherazade complemented the standard Australian menu of salads (cheese, ham, mixed, asparagus, garden), eggs (poached, scrambled, fried, soft boiled, ham and eggs), omelettes (plain, cheese, ham, tomato, savoury), sandwiches (ham, cheese, tomato, asparagus), and soups (tomato, vegetable, chicken) with standard Australian-European fare (spaghetti bolognaise, ravioli, frankfurters and sauerkraut) and eastern European Jewish food (borscht, Wiener schnitzel, goulash, Russian cutlets, and calves liver). The Zeleznikows came from Bundist families and were agnostics who never kept kosher or the Sabbath. They and their first partners, the Pinskiers (see below), had no idea of how to serve kosher food and had no ability or intention to do so. In those days, Scheherazade provided many services of the milk bar it originally was, selling chocolates, cigarettes, and rotisserie chickens, amongst other items (see Figure 2). The original menu of the 1950s was quite Anglo-Australian: it included canned

fruit salad with vanilla ice cream, and ham and eggs.[18] Scheherazade became different and multicultural: it had Greek, Polish, and Hungarian cooks. For their first year in Scheherazade, the Zeleznikows, with two young children, lived above the shop. Not having a car, they then moved to apartments in Balaclava and Elwood, both within easy walking distance of Acland Street.

Café Scheherazade in its heyday

Eventually, the Zeleznikows altered the Scheherazade menu, introducing more central and eastern European Jewish food, including cholent, gefilte fish, latkes, blintzes, chopped herring, brown bread, schnitzels, borscht, and roast duck. Purely Australian food, such as canned fruit salad with vanilla ice cream, was eventually replaced by European foods such as gelato, cassata, and tartufo. A Gaggia espresso machine was purchased.[19] Under the Zeleznikows, whilst the menu gradually transitioned to being more European, the café was a constant feature of Melbourne cultural life for almost 40 years (see Figure 3). As the freelance food and travel writer, Clarissa Hyman, wrote,

> The restaurant remains a shrine to 1950s retro, still with its sentimental can-can wallpaper and pretty, pastel-coloured neon sign. The down-at-heel, derelicts, waifs and strays who once populated the neighbourhood have given way to a more sophisticated, albeit motley, crowd of students and artists, craftsmen and media folk alongside the core of holocaust survivors who were the restaurant's first customers. In this café of old-world dreams, there are those who still eat there every day, as they have been doing for nearly fifty years; one doughty group meet daily for coffee at 9am. … Noisy, crowded, familiar. A place, like home, in which to laugh and gossip, argue and cry, read, play cards. A place in which to both remember and forget impossible, terrible memories. Pumpkin soup and pavlova have become Australian-Jewish New World staples, but at the Café Scheherazade the menu remains an encomium[20] to Old World tastes. Nothing has changed, even down to the 'terrible tinned fruit salad' (only family are allowed to say this, of course), but what does that matter when you've got the best baked cheesecake ever, apple cake and cheese blintzes as well as chicken soup and knaidlach, braised brisket, cabbage rolls, borscht... … Masha describes in a bitter-sweet tone how many of her recipes were based on those she learnt from her mother. 'In Poland, I studied medicine for three years until the day I was forced to flee. I always thought I would be a doctor. … I would never have believed that one day I would have my own restaurant called Café Scheherazade and that I would end up teaching my mother's recipes to a Greek chef.' (Hyman 2003)[21]

Although Masha and Avram were seen as the face of Scheherazade, they invariably had partners. Various partners came into and left the business over the years, and eventually, following ill health and a tragedy in the Zeleznikow family, the working hours of the partners needed to increase.

Scheherazade was open long hours: 10am to midnight, 364 days a year. It was only closed on *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Given that the owners needed to clean the kitchen, the coffee machine, and the interior of the shop before opening, and also clean up after closing, the owners were often working 16 hours a day, or over 110 hours per week. Partners were needed to share the work. The partners had to start cleaning the café at 9am and often did not leave until 1am. The first partners were the Pinskiers, who were fellow Bundists[22] from Poland. The Pinskiers found the operating hours of Scheherazade very demanding. In 1962, they asked to leave the partnership. Subsequently, from 1962-68, the Zeleznikows, for the one period in their ownership of Cafe Scheherazade, ran the cafe without partners. In 1969, the Lewingers became partners. Then followed fellow Bundists and Holocaust survivors, Abram and Cesia Goldberg. Abram Goldberg was very involved in the development of the Melbourne Jewish Holocaust Centre, becoming a life governor, receiving an OAM, and publishing a history of his life (Harris & Goldberg 2022). The Goldbergs left after a bitter dispute with the Zeleznikows, and eventually opened a café in the city—Goldys. Another Holocaust survivor, Yosl Winkler, was a constant customer. At the café, he became friendly with one of the waitresses, Shirley. They married, and for a brief period became partners with the Zeleznikows. Sadly, Yosl contracted Guillain-Barré syndrome, and the couple separated and had to sell their share in Scheherazade. This allowed the Szarachs to become partners. Under the Szarachs, there were further additions to the Scheherazade menu, for example, roast duck, and Maria Szarach began baking the café's famous cheesecake and apple cake, as well as other cakes, meaning the café no longer bought cakes from the Monarch Cake Shop, two doors away. Having partners allowed Avram time to have more extensive involvement in the Jewish community, his real love. At various times, he was Secretary, Treasurer, and President of the AJWRS, later renamed Jewish Care Victoria, an executive member of the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, a delegate to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, a member of the board of governors of Mt. Scopus College, and ran the communal *Yom Hashoah* commemorations. Most infuriatingly for his Bundist colleagues, he was heavily involved in fundraising for the Jewish National Fund. Contrary to common belief, for many years Avram never worked at Scheherazade on Sunday mornings—he was busy teaching at Sholem Aleichem College.

I can still recall how arduous life at Scheherazade was. On New Year's Eve 1967, as a mere 17-year-old, I worked in the restaurant while my parents went to a New Year's Eve party with an Israeli General who had

fought with my father in the Jewish Partisans in the Rudniki Forest in 1943 and 1944. They were celebrating the Israeli victory in the Six Day War against Syria, Egypt and Jordan. I also opened the café at 9am the next morning. At 4pm, my mother turned up at the restaurant, telling me to go for a run—I was a keen distance runner, as I still am 56 years later—because I would have to work the 6pm to midnight shift: Avram and the general had had a vodka sculling competition the previous night, and he was in no state to work.

In 1977, a tragedy occurred for the Zeleznikow family, when their younger daughter, Barbara, was killed in a car accident. Masha did not want to talk about the accident and thus avoided café customers, spending little time in the restaurant from then on. Like her husband, and also myself,[23] she became involved in communal affairs, especially assisting recent arrivals from the USSR. Masha met them at the airport, found them housing and jobs and running social events. She was especially active in ensuring that Russian doctors were able to retrain to practise in Australia, an opportunity she would have loved herself but sadly missed out on. At the AJWRS and Jewish Care Victoria, she ran the Tuesday Club for elderly Russian immigrants for 28 years.[24] On the first Tuesday of every month except January, the club provided a lunch, speakers in Russian and Yiddish, a cultural program, and bingo. In 2015, she was awarded the Council on the Ageing Senior Achiever Award at the Victorian Senior of the Year Awards (Chaitowitz 2015).

Avram and Masha travelled to the USA in 1979, 1980, and 1983 to visit me while I was working as a professor of mathematics at Northern Illinois University, Michigan State University, and Mount Holyoke College. During the 1983 visit, Avram had a major heart attack. Fortunately, he was staying with a Bundist doctor friend, Emma Zelmanowicz, in Boca Raton, Florida. Avram was transported to South Miami Hospital, where he was given an angiogram and angioplasty surgery. At that time, such surgery was not available in Australia. But, with the Szarachs ageing, Avram's illness, and Masha's reluctance to spend much time at Café Scheherazade, it was time to find newer, younger partners. The Zeleznikows found a recently arrived Russian Jewish family, Ludmilla and Misha Yukelis, who became their new partners. As an incentive for the Yukelis couple to work longer hours, they received a reduced payment to buy into the partnership and reduced rental for the 99 Acland Street property. They would be the second-to-last partners in the business.

During the 1980s, the restaurant faced a changing clientele. The patrons became more likely to be the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, rather than survivors themselves. The newer, younger clients were searching for the food their mothers and grandmothers used to serve them. Also, given Melbourne's small Jewish community,[25] and the fact that

Café Scheherazade was not kosher, the restaurant always relied financially on clients who were not members of the Jewish community.

By this time, the café had been running for a significant number of years. Some large celebrations were held for milestone years of the café. These were organised by Masha Zeleznikow, who was very skilled in obtaining publicity for the café. A gigantic 30th anniversary party was held on 25 May 1988, where Joan Child, speaker of the Australian House of Representatives, and Clyde Holding, Australian Minister for Immigration, spoke about the restaurant's significance to Melbourne life. An exhibition of Kurt Duldig's drawings on Scheherazade napkins was opened by Dr. Eric Westbrook, who gave a lecture about Duldig's art. Many dignitaries spoke about the significance of Scheherazade on Melbourne cultural life. A second party at the café was held for its 35th milestone in 1993. The historical booklet mentioned above was published to celebrate the anniversary (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow 1992). The booklet included tributes from Clyde Holding, the celebrated artist, John Howley, the renowned filmmaker, Bob Weis, and the well-known Melbourne artist, Mirka Mora. In many ways, Mora had been a compatriot and competitor of the Zeleznikows. She was born in Paris, from a Lithuanian Jewish father and a Romanian Jewish mother, migrated to Australia in 1951, and opened the Tolarno Art Gallery and Restaurant in St. Kilda in 1966. In the booklet, Mirka Mora has a hand-written note:

> SCHEHERAZADE. 15 June 93. 1.30 pm. Time stands still in this place, where all the memories are waiting for the picking. Friends & family are all sitting at their respective table, invisible, waiting to exist yet again in our imagination. Thank you everyone at Scheherazade. As to the food, Marcel Proust eat your heart out …. MIRKA MORA. (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow 1992)

Selling Café Scheherazade

By 1996, the Yukelis family was tired of working long hours in Scheherazade. They had worked hard for 13 years, and wanted a change in lifestyle. Avram turned 72, and had numerous health issues. So, a sale of the café was imminent. In September 1996, the restaurant, but not the freehold, was sold to George Szarach, the son of the previous partners, and his wife Esther, a former waitress at Scheherazade. A contractual agreement for the Zeleznikows to stay involved in the promotion of the restaurant in return for certain benefits was signed. But, sadly, there was disagreement as to the length of the agreement—the Zeleznikows thought it was for 12 years, whilst the Szarachs argued it was only for three years. Also, the Szarachs did not realise that the success of Café Scheherazade was intimately related to the involvement of the Zeleznikows. Without their involvement the reputation of the restaurant was severely diminished. And so it passed. In 2008, at the conclusion of the 12-year lease, the Zeleznikows demanded a

commercial rate for the use of the 99 Acland Street property. The Szarachs refused to pay the required amount, and Scheherazade was moved to Hawthorn Road, North Caulfield. The restaurant was not financially viable in its new location. It shut its doors in 2010.

Following their retirement from Café Scheherazade in 1996, Masha and Avram continued and, in fact, extended their Jewish communal involvement. Masha and Avram joined B'nai B'rith and formed the Raoul Wallenberg Unit of B'nai B'rith in 1985. As part of their involvement with the Wallenberg Unit, they were intimately involved with the formation of the organisation, Courage to Care. While it initially focussed upon Holocaust education, Courage to Care now educates high school students about general issues regarding genocide, and encourages students not to be bystanders. Masha, and particularly Avram, found this transition difficult to accept. For their services to multicultural and Jewish communities, Masha and Avram were both awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in the 2003 Queen's Birthday awards.

The café as a place of community support

Communal groups, such as the Kadimah, David Herman Group, Landsmanschaften and AJWRS, provided organised support to the Jewish community of Melbourne, as did the variety of synagogues. The AJWRS was specifically responsible for survivor migration, while the Kadimah and the David Herman Group served earlier waves of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe as well as the survivors, and were cultural institutions.

The Landsmanshaftn were societies of immigrants who came from the same town or region. In Melbourne, they emerged with the arrival of Yiddish-speaking refugees. The Landsmanshaftn were integral to the new immigrants' adjustment in their Australian home, since they provided emotional, cultural, social, and even financial support. In 1955, there were known to be scores of Landmanshaftn in Melbourne. In 2010, the Bialystocker, Krakower, the Warsaw Centre, the Lodzer Centre, Zaglembier, Chelmer, Lomzer, Kalisher and Radomer Landsmanshaftn still exist in Melbourne (Monash University n.d.b). The Melbourne Kadimah had been founded in 1911 by newly arrived immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia, and served as a cultural centre for the Jews of Melbourne, with a library, meeting space, lectures, and theatre. Kadimah continues to be a community focal point at its new premises in Elsternwick, with its lending library, reading circle, and the David Herman theatre group is still active (Gurt 2011, 444; Benjamin 1998). Arnold Zable writes about the David Herman Theatre Group in his book *Wanderers and Dreamers* (Zable 1998). In the 1970s and 1980s, the cast and attendees of David Herman Theatre productions often came to Scheherazade after a production. The famous Israeli actress, Lea Koenig, who is still performing today at the Israeli National Theatre at the age of 94,[26] often appeared with the David Herman

Theatre Group. Rodney Benjamin discusses the role of the AJWRS and its precursors in providing support for Melbourne Jews (Benjamin 1998). The Melbourne Jewish Philanthropic Society was formed in 1848 to provide assistance to those Jews in need. At that time the entire Jewish population of Victoria numbered only 200.[27] Jewish Care Victoria has just celebrated its 175th anniversary. In contrast to the work of these communal groups, we argue that the café provided a form of private community support.

Reporting Avram and Masha's OAM awards, *The Age* wrote, "For 45 years they have provided chicken soup for the soul to the Jewish community through their well-known St Kilda restaurant Scheherazade and their involvement in Jewish Care" (Carbone 2003). In the 1950s, given Avram's involvement in the Jewish community, and the lack of hospitality and catering venues for Holocaust survivors, Masha had hit upon the idea of providing services for survivors and their families. The café provided such services and was a great outlet for the Zeleznikows' interests and activities. The services it provided were a safe space, with delicious, familiar food, fellow feeling, a warm welcome to all, noise and life, and a degree of flexibility around payment for those with little money. Nicknamed 'the Jewish Parliament' or just 'the Parliament', the café was a vibrant place of loud discussion, even argument ("John Zeleznikow and Cafe Scheherazade", 2016). The café also offered an opportunity for networking, which was an important activity leading to success among Jewish refugees and survivors in Australia (Rutland 2008, 140). Avram recalled,

> [When the café opened,] Masha started cooking meals for between 30 and 40 single men, Holocaust survivors would come. They liked Masha's cooking and it became their home. They talked about the past and things that were happening. The main topic was what was happening in Israel, in the Jewish world. They called it 'the Parliament' and after a while it became a place for couples as well. Conversations were mostly in Yiddish. It was a home for them. It wasn't just a restaurant. There was a shoemaker who arrived in the 1930s and saved money to bring his wife and children. He had a permit for them and the money for tickets in 1939. But it was too late. He came every Saturday at 9am and sat until midnight. It was too early and too painful to speak about their lives. But they knew they could come with any request or any problem. (Monash University 2008)

It is recognised that survivors generally did not speak about their experiences to their children or within the wider community. However, they did speak about their experiences with other survivors.[28] The social connection with other survivors was possible at the café. Many Holocaust survivors lived near Scheherazade—in local apartments, AJWRS housing in Rose and Herbert Streets, St. Kilda, and the Montefiore homes a short tram ride away at St. Kilda Junction. To support their regulars—often lifelong

bachelors, who had survived the Holocaust and lived in boarding houses in St. Kilda—the Zeleznikows developed day menus, a fixed, three-course meal, which were only available to selected Holocaust survivors. And, for survivors who could not afford a day menu, the meal was gratis. Some customers were so regular that they had special cups and drinks made for them. For example, Mr. Aufgang came in every morning at 11am to have his Vienna coffee in a glass cup: black espresso coffee with cream. His glass was specially reserved for him.

The café was a haven for many artists, whether born in Australia or abroad, including John Howley, mentioned above, and Karl Duldig. John Howley was an Australian painter who, from 1965-67, lived in Tel Aviv. In 1967, he returned to Melbourne, and started to exhibit at Georges Mora's Tolarno Gallery. In 1980 he established, with his Israeli curator wife, The Acland Street Art Gallery, that continued to exhibit Howley, along with other artists, until 1989. Howley and his family ate two to three meals a day at Scheherazade, either in the restaurant or as take-away. Rather than paying cash for his meals, he paid in artworks.[29] The Viennese-educated sculptor, Karl Duldig, frequented the restaurant with his wife, Slawa, and daughter.

Figure 3: Customers at Café Scheherazade in the late 1970s. Source credit: Reproduced by permission from the Estate of Masha Zeleznikow.

During the copious hours he spent at the restaurant, he enjoyed the opportunity to sketch his fellow patrons. Sometimes he drew into his own sketchbooks, but often he asked the waitress for a piece of paper, or he simply drew on the serviettes. As his daughter, Eva de Jong-Duldig, said, 'These sketches were spontaneous, fleeting impressions, which seemed to capture in a few lines the essence of the person, who was rarely aware of Karl's activity' (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow 1992).[30]

In his Introduction to a 2020 edition of Arnold Zable's book, *Café Scheherazade*, Bram Presser wrote,

> While I ate, my grandparents would regale me with stories of their younger years; of restaurants that served this dish, or relatives who cooked that one. It was never explicitly said, but in their voices and the way they held themselves, I could tell that here, in this city of new beginnings, Scheherazade was home. At neighbouring tables, I'd see familiar faces. It was a Jewish community hub, as holy as any synagogue. But it was also a local St Kilda institution, its bustling other worldliness perfectly suited to the misfits, struggling artists and local sex workers, who would stop by and be welcomed with the same warmth and generosity of spirit as those who had washed ashore from *der alter velt*. When the cafe closed, in September 2008, Melbourne lost what had, for fifty years, been one of its most endearing cultural crucibles. (Presser 2020)

Conclusion

Café Scheherazade was a cultural icon. The café's location within walking distance of cultural icons, such as the Palais Theatre, the Victory Cinema, now National Theatre, Luna Park, and St. Kilda Beach, meant that patrons of those venues were likely to visit the café also. It was a haven for competitors at the St. Kilda Bowls Club. Celebrities often visited the café. These included Dame Joan Sutherland, when performing at the Palais, Bob Hawke, after Labor Friends of Israel activities, and Whitlam government ministers Moss Cass, Frank Crean, John Wheeldon, and Al Grassby. Clyde Holding, the aforementioned Minister of Immigration in the Hawke government and Local Member of the House of Representatives for Melbourne Ports 1977-98, whose office was in Acland Street, was a regular customer. Scheherazade was an afterparty venue for Gough Whitlam's final campaign function at St. Kilda Town Hall for the 1972 'It's time' election campaign, on 30 November 1972.

Acland Street had many more Jewish cafés than Scheherazade. Red Rock and Café Danube served Hungarian cuisine, while Reuven served wonderful Israeli hummus and felafel. Deveroli was a New York-style delicatessen. And, there were the bookshops such as Balberyszski, the delicatessens such as Benedykt, and the fabulous cake shops—not only

Monarch, which has now been serving the community for 89 years, but also Europa and Le Bon.[31] But, Scheherazade was called the 'Jewish parliament', where customers could nourish themselves on chicken soup for both the body and the soul, thanks to the caring and community-minded natures and commitment of the Zeleznikows.

The legacy of the Zeleznikows and the Café Scheherazade lives on. Sadly, the café no longer exists, nor do the clientele for whom its existence provided succour. But its memory lives on! Avram died on 8 June 2013.[32] Masha died on 18 June 2016.[33] Both died at the age of 89, in the Gregorian month of June and the Hebrew month of Sivan. They are buried side by side at the Melbourne *Chevra Kadisha* Cemetery in Springvale, Victoria, Australia. Their love story, which was celebrated in a St. Valentine's Day newspaper article about 'Melbourne's great loves' (Beaumont 2005), continues.

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Endnotes

[1] See for example Jabeer Butt, "Are we there yet?"
[2] See PEN Melbourne, "Patron and Ambassador at Large".
[3] Italics in original.

[4] See, for example, Suzanne Carbone, "OAM for pair who ladle soup for the soul".
[5] Following the end of World War One, there was conflict between the newly created states of Lithuania and Poland between 1919 and 1922. The Polish government took control of Vilna on 20 February 1922. In this article, I use the English name 'Vilna' rather than the Polish name 'Wilno' or the Lithuanian name 'Vilnius'.
[6] See Monash University, "Avram Zeleznikow (1924-)".
[7] The Institute for Research on the Jewish Question was a Nazi Party political institution. It was conceived as a branch of a projected elite university of the party under the direction of Alfred Rosenberg.
[8] See Ofer Aderet, "Instead of Food, They Smuggled Books Into the Vilna Ghetto"; and YIVO Institute, "The Paper Brigade". The YIVO report says, 'A Nazi Division known as Einsatzstab Rosenberg arrived in Vilna in June 1941 armed with lists of libraries, museums, and other rare collections they intended on looting. Part of their mission was to collect materials for a Nazi "Institute for the Investigation of the Jewish Question," an organisation that was to study the Jews after they had been exterminated. Among the places on their list were the famed Strashun Jewish Public Library and the YIVO Institute.'
[9] See Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, on the trials and tribulations of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War Two.
[10] See, for example, Livak, *Russian Émigrés in the Intellectual and Literary Life of Interwar France*.
[11] Nagornov was a graduate of the Kiev Cadet Academy and the Kiev Military Academy, a veteran of World War One, and fought with 'the Whites' in the Russian Civil War. The cabaret was managed by Colonel Dmitrii Dmitrievich Chikhachev.
[12] See Prosser, '"Trip was a nightmare,' said Protea migrants."
[13] See Peter Medding, *From Assimilation to Group Survival: A Political and Sociological Study of an Australian Jewish Community*.
[14] See, for example, a history of Australian *Beth Dins* (Cowen 2020) and a history of the Melbourne Jewish Welfare and Relief Society (Benjamin 1998).
[15] For a detailed discussion of Yiddish Melbourne, see Taft and Markus, *A Second Chance*.
[16] For the full interview transcript in English, see Monash University, "Avram Zeleznikow: The early 1950s".
[17] For a description of Leo and Mina Fink's contribution to Melbourne Jewry, see Taft, *Leo and Mina Fink: For the Greater Good*.
[18] See the menus in Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow, *Scheherazade Restaurant*, 23.

[19] Pellegrini's (66 Bourke St, Melbourne) was one of the first wave of Italian cafés in the city of Melbourne. The claim that Pellegrini's had the first espresso machine in Melbourne is open to debate, with establishments in Carlton's Lygon Street acquiring their machines at about the same time. However, it's likely that they had the first one in the Central Business District that used the process invented by Gaggia in 1948, pushing steam rather than hot water through the coffee. Hence, according to aficionados, other coffee machines were not true espresso machines (Australian Food Timeline n.d.).
[20] Encomium – a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly.
[21] On page 27, Hyman presents the recipe for Café Scheherazade borscht, the cold, dairy version which was available in summertime. The soup was often served with *latkes* [potato pancakes]. Sadly, Masha Zeleznikow was very reluctant to make her recipes available.
[22] Slucki (2008) discusses the operation of the Bund in Melbourne, noting that it grew rapidly in the post-war years due to the immigration of Holocaust survivors. This arrival of thousands of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe created an environment in which the Bund could develop more effectively.
[23] I was elected to the board of the AJWRS in 1973, and was a councillor at the City of Caulfield from 1977-79.
[24] See JewishCareVic, "The Tuesday Club - SBS News Report 6 December 2015".
[25] Based on the 2016 census, the number of Jews in Victoria is estimated to be about 54,735 (Markus et al. 2020, 2).
[26] See Habima, "Marzipan".
[27] See Rodney Benjamin, *A serious influx of Jews: A history of Jewish welfare in Victoria*.
[28] Elie Wiesel told a survivors' gathering forty years after liberation: "Remember, fellow survivors, when we emerged from the ghettos and forests and death camps, hopelessly determined to invoke hope and tell the tales, few were willing to listen. Survivors were understood by survivors alone." (Wiesel 1984, quoted in Stein 2009)
[29] Through an inheritance, I am now the owner of many Howley paintings.
[30] Today, Karl Duldig's drawings are maintained at the Duldig Studio museum + sculpture garden. Eva wrote a memoir about her parents (de Jong-Duldig 2017), which was adapted into a play by Jane Bodie and performed as *Driftwood: The Musical*.
[31] See, for example, "A piece of cake brings a taste of history".
[32] See Zable, "Escape to Paris inspired iconic local café".

[33] See Zeleznikow, "Refugees' restaurant provided a welcoming taste of home for survivors of the Holocaust", and "Melbourne's Jewish community farewells iconic St Kilda cake shop owner Masha Zeleznikow".