

Editorial

When *Stand* was first published in 1952 Emanuel Litvinoff was 37. He was one of its first contributors. He died on the evening of Saturday 24th September 2011 aged 96. He was born on 5th May 1915 in London's Whitechapel. He was a poet, novelist and editor. He also played an important role in journalism, politics and the defence of Jews in Britain and Europe. Litvinoff had a wide sense of history partly through his consciousness of Jewishness, partly through his very physical involvement in twentieth-century conflict, warfare, and culture. It is hard to imagine today the ways in which *Stand*'s origins directly involve war, the survivors of war, and war poets. The *Jewish Chronicle* of 10 April 1959 reports a debate between Jon Silkin, Bernard Kops, Peter Shaffer and Litvinoff who '...spoke of the "rich background" of Jewish history on which the Jewish writer was privileged to draw. No writer who was a Jew could write validly and truthfully without being aware of his position as a Jew, he said... Mr Silkin added that it was necessary for the Jewish writer to feel a sense of identification with the Jewish victims of persecution, and to attempt to "interpret the burden of Jewish history".'

Was he a 'war poet'? In the early 1950s such a term perhaps was not burdened with some of its present Examination Board

conventions. But Litvinoff was, if anyone was who wrote for *Stand*, a war poet. His first book of poems, *The Untried Soldier*, was published in 1942 while he was on active service in the Pioneer Corps. Routledge announced on its back cover new volumes of poetry by the following: Keidrych Rhys, John Heath-Stubbs, Alan Rook, Sidney Keyes, Alex Comfort, Morwenna Donnelly and J. F. Hendry, a notable fellowship for this date. It is a slim volume and the 25 poems' titles include the words 'Soldier(s)' four times and 'War' three; also 'Serving', 'Service', 'Memorial', 'Leave' and 'Reveille' - one might expect poems of military routine and combat. But not so. With three years left of the War the very particular and enormously disturbing context is everywhere. There was a need to interpret and understand and this need came from the complex position of victim, participant and prophet:

TODAY I take a province for my lesson.
From a window in history, from time
given to quiet and no time today I regard
and meditate the broken city.

(‘Today I take a province for my lesson’)

In some ways this is similar to the language and message of *The Waste Land* though its sober, diagnostic declamation comes from a very different background. How was the difference manifest?

A Crown for Cain, written in West Africa and Egypt, appeared in 1948 and *Notes for a Survivor* in 1973. He is remembered for reading his critical poem 'To T. S. Eliot' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1951. It was the first ever ICA poetry reading, chaired by Herbert Read, and Litvinoff was speaking when Eliot had slipped quietly into the room. Perhaps as interesting as the controversy about poetry, loyalty, tact and truth which ensued was the fact that Litvinoff's poetry at that time was in many ways close to Eliot's through its sense of being positioned in the broadest sweep of history and warfare. Eliot was overheard by Dannie Abse muttering 'generously, "It's a good poem, it's a very good poem".' This encounter marked extraordinary unities, intersections, and clashes of cultures. The poem was reprinted in *Stand* Vol. 4 No. 3.

The work of many poets from the 1940s and 1950s, including Eliot's, is interesting to approach through Litvinoff as war poet rather than from the other way round. He encouraged many writers, editors, and publishers including Jon Silkin and *Stand*. His autobiographical *Journey Through a Small Planet* is a Penguin Classic. I recorded in a *Stand* editorial some years ago how Jon Silkin offered me the chance of participating in 'handing on' Litvinoff's knowledge through editing and marketing a new pamphlet of his work, *Notes for a Survivor*.

I last met him in the company of his wife Mary and son Aaron with Anthony Rudolf three years ago. It was a memorably happy, humorous, and exhilarating occasion. Many back copies of *Stand* were within easy reach on the shelf behind him and I remain moved and heartened by the fact that the last photograph taken of Emanuel Litvinoff with his family has *Notes for a Survivor*, face forward, just above him.

There is more about him in these websites:

http://www.emmanuel-litvinoff.com/Emanuel_Litvinoff.html

and in obituaries published in the *Guardian*
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/sep/26/emmanuel-litvinoff>

and the *Telegraph*.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8792468/Emanuel-Litvinoff.html>

Jon Glover,
26th November, 2011.

