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In the mouth of the dragon

Hans Keilson's books, based on his own experiences during the Holocaust, were forgotten for decades. Lately they have been enjoying a revival, and the late Jewish-German psychiatrist and writer lived to see them win popular and critical acclaim.

By Avner Shapira

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Nico was a foreign Jew hidden by a Dutch couple, Wim and Marie, in their home during World War II. After his death from pneumonia, Marie discovers that he had hidden something from them. Among his effects she finds a pack of fine American cigarettes, whose aroma had become a mere pungent memory in Nazi-occupied Holland. Marie wonders why Nico had not shared his little treasure with them and preferred to keep them for himself, to be savored only at rare moments. She comes to understand that "the cigarettes belonged to him alone. Everything else he had shared with them, or they with him, depending on how you looked at it." She decides to keep his secret and burns the remaining cigarettes without anyone else enjoying them. Thus Marie parts from her guest, who had become like a member of the family to her and Wim, her husband.

The story of Nico's concealment is at the heart of the novella "Comedy in a Minor Key," by the late Jewish-German writer Hans Keilson, which has just been published in Hebrew (by Keter; an English translation by Damion Searls, from which all quotes here are taken, is available in paperback). Keilson himself, who fled from Germany to Holland before the start of the war, survived the Holocaust thanks in part to a Dutch couple who sheltered him. He continued living in Holland after the war. In the novella he draws a connection between the small smoke rings Nico blows in his hiding place and the flames that engulfed all of Europe, and beyond. He also shows how the horrors of the war and the Nazi persecution could, despite everything, spark moments of decency, understanding and human solidarity.

"Comedy in a Minor Key" was published in German in 1947, followed 12 years later by a novel, "The Death of the Adversary." Now, after decades in which Keilson's work was forgotten, he is enjoying a reprise. "Comedy in a Minor Key" appeared in English, and "The Death of the Adversary" (which was published in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s and was a best-seller) has been reissued in a new translation (also by Searls). Both books have been critical and popular successes. The novelist Francine Prose wrote in The New York Times that they are "masterpieces" and added, "Hans Keilson is a genius." Extensive interviews with Keilson appeared in the Times, the Observer and other leading newspapers.

Keilson died on May 31 at the age of 101. The Hebrew edition of "Comedy in a Minor Key" also contains a memoir by him, and the transcript of a conversation he conducted with his publisher, Heinrich Detering. Taken together, the three texts open a window on the world of the writer, who was a psychiatrist and worked in the field, and was not especially interested in cultivating a literary career. "He did not like being considered a writer by profession. He himself always cited his late father (who immigrated to the Netherlands in 1939 and was murdered in Auschwitz): 'Don't forget: You are a doctor!'" his widow, Dr. Marita Keilson-Lauritz, relates in an interview conducted by email.

Indeed, she says that her late husband attached far greater importance to his scientific work - in particular his research on "sequential traumatization" in children, which was based on his work with Jewish war orphans and was highly regarded in the profession. Still, she adds, "The great success of his books toward the end of his life made him and the whole family very happy; the last year of his life was wonderful." Keilson himself told Detering, "There are many people who experience what I have experienced lately - but after their death. The fact that I am still here, that I can experience this directly, is a special privilege."

He noted that his fiction "did not come into the world because of any literary ambitions. These were things which just had to burst out and be written ... There was simply something stuck in my craw and I had to be rid of it."

The things that stuck in Keilson's craw drew on both his personal life and the historical transformations that occurred in his lifetime. "Comedy in a Minor Key" is based largely on his personal experience of hiding for a time in the home of a Dutch couple, Leo and Suus Rientsma, in Delft. The novella is dedicated to them. Keilson-Lauritz notes that her husband began the novel in 1944, while he was still in hiding.

"The two Rientsma girls told me the house described in the book very much resembles their family's home, and it is still standing," she says. "The couple Marie and Wim in the novella in some way reflect a young couple who then lived in Delft and whom my husband knew well - Ary and Evy Bakker - who also hid Jews during the war or ensured that they had places of hiding and false papers."

She adds that Nico's death from an illness, instead of at the hands of the Nazis, is also based on something that happened in Delft. So is the fact that the couple who hid the man who died, exactly like Marie and Wim, had to get rid of the body quickly and were thus at great risk. The character of Nico is not based directly on a real person, but Keilson-Lauritz relates that "in one of the last discussions about 'Comedy in a Minor Key,' my husband identified himself with Nico."

Even before Nico's death generates a turning point in the plot, the novella is surprising because of the direct look it provides at the world of the rescuers and their daily routine, which is radically upended in the wake of their moral decisions. They are minor heroes, hesitant and unsure of themselves, who act in the shadow of major historical events. Even though the events in question are fundamentally tragic, Keilson offers incisive descriptions not only of the sorrow and the pity their situation entails, but also of the many accompanying amusing and comic moments.

He also perceptively describes in the book the "all too human disappointment ... that he [Nico] had died on them"; after all, "You don't get the chance to save someone every day."

Waiting for liberation

Throughout the period in which the couple hides Nico, Marie "had secretly imagined what it would be like on liberation day, the three of them walking arm in arm out of their house. Everyone would see right away what he was from his place face, the color of a shut-in, which his appearance only emphasized even more. How the neighbors and everyone else on the street would look when he suddenly walked out of their house ... It would give them a little sense of satisfaction, and everyone who makes a sacrifice needs a little sense of satisfaction. And then you'd feel that you, you personally, even if only just a little bit, had won the war."

For Keilson, the happiness at the crushing of the Nazis was mixed with mourning for his parents, whom he had managed to smuggle out of Germany to Holland after the Kristallnacht pogrom, but had not been able to save from annihilation in the Holocaust. A feeling of guilt for this haunted him for the rest of his life, he related.

Like many German Jews, Keilson's parents, who lived in Bad Freienwalde, a spa town on the Oder River near the German-Polish border, found it difficult to believe that the Germans would do them harm - not least because Keilson's father had fought in World War I and been awarded a medal. Keilson, who was born on December 12, 1909, was his parents' third child. The first, a son, died in infancy; a daughter, Hilda, was born afterward.

As a boy, adolescent and young man Keilson witnessed the upheavals that his homeland underwent: the defeat in World War I, the collapse of the Second Reich, the establishment of the Weimar Republic, the subsequent economic and political crises, and the first years of the Nazi regime. "Tatters of destruction shaped my life and my memory," he writes in his memoir.

In 1928, Keilson moved to Berlin, where he attended medical school and earned money playing the trumpet. It was there that he wrote his first novel, "Life Goes On," whose protagonist, a Jewish merchant, is based on Keilson's father, a textile merchant. The book, whose plot is set against the backdrop of the economic crisis at the end of the Weimar period, was published in early 1933.

In the office of Samuel Fischer, one of Germany's leading publishers, where he was informed that his book would be published, Keilson met a major writer of the time, Alfred Döblin, the author of "Berlin Alexanderplatz." Keilson noted jestingly to Fischer, "I think Döblin is in good company here."

"Life Goes On," which was subsequently banned by the Nazis, was the last book by a Jew which S. Fischer Verlag published before the passage of the Nuremberg Laws. Nevertheless, Keilson stayed in Germany for three more years, though he was prohibited from practicing medicine and made a living teaching sports and swimming in Jewish schools. The Nuremberg Laws also prevented Keilson from marrying the woman he loved, Gertrud Manz, who was a Catholic. In Holland, too, where they fled, they could not marry because they were Germans. After smuggling his parents to Holland, Keilson worked for the underground, treating refugee children under the assumed name of a non-Jewish German physician.

Carrying false papers and exuding more than a little self-confidence he traveled throughout Holland - wherever he was sent by the underground - wandering in "the mouth of the dragon," as he put it. "I did not carry a firearm and I never learned how to use a firearm," he notes in the memoir. "I felt safer when I was outside my house in Delft."

No longer a German

"I must also take leave of my memory sometimes, from parts of it, at least. But what do I want? After all, I am 100 years-old."

- Hans Keilson, interview with Dietrich Detering

Keilson and Manz had a daughter, Barbara, who was born in 1941, when the couple were not living together. In order to protect the child, her mother told people that the father was a German soldier (but after the war told everyone who asked that the father was indeed a German, but a Jew). Manz herself converted to Judaism after the war, in the wake of the shock she felt at the silence of the Catholic Church vis-a-vis the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust; she then married Keilson. She died in 1969, and a year later Keilson married Marita Lauritz, who was 25 years his junior. The family lived in Bussum, a town near Amsterdam; their daughter, Bloeme, was born in 1974.

Asked why her husband remained in Holland after the collapse of the Third Reich, Lauritz-Keilson replies, "He always said that his first wife, Gertrud Manz, who urged him to leave Germany in 1936, didn't want to return to Germany after the war. But I think he also didn't want to return himself. He worked for 60 years as a psychiatrist with Dutch clients - in the first place, with Jewish war orphans (see "Sequential Traumatization in Children," Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992). So perhaps he identified with the Dutch Jews in the first place."

Keilson spoke about his German identity in the interview with Detering. "When I learned about my parents' death I ceased to be a German," he said starkly. However, he did not hate the Germans. The reason he did not return to his homeland stemmed from a different reason, he explained: "I knew that I would not be able to work in my profession in Germany. The Germans certainly would have felt a sense of guilt toward me because I am a Jew and they are Germans. Accordingly, I realized that I could no longer be a therapist of Germans in Germany."

Keilson's interest in psychology is clearly discernible in "The Death of the Adversary," a philosophical-psychological novel which describes the Nazis' rise to power from the viewpoint of a young Jew who is growing up at that time. Keilson began writing the book in Holland before the German occupation and afterward buried the manuscript in the garden of his house. He completed the novel after Hitler's death.

The protagonist of the book (to be published in Hebrew by Keter in autumn 2012) examines his identity and the motives of the

enemy who is persecuting him. Even though the enemy's name is never mentioned, it is clearly the Nazi Fuehrer, who is depicted as needing Jews to project upon them all he despises in his own personality.

"For me, Hitler was a character in a drama of fate," Keilson said about the book. "I thought he must be a disturbed person, someone incapable of loving. I think that all his sexuality was expressed in aggressive fantasies."

At the same time, Keilson made it clear that the novel's grappling with the mechanism of hatred has relevance beyond an understanding of the Nazi regime. His attempt to cope with his mourning for his parents led him to the insight that "I must not adopt what my enemy dictated as my definition ... because hatred is a doctrine of self-destruction." From this point of view, he noted in the conversation with Detering, "The Death of the Adversary" is, for example, relevant when it comes to understanding the protracted conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Keilson-Lauritz, who is not Jewish, points out that her late husband felt it was important to preserve his Jewish identity. "It was in some way perhaps something he always feared to lose," she says.

Asked if she was influenced by her husband's books in her own work as a literary scholar, Keilson-Lauritz replies: "I deal mainly with the associations between homosexuality and literature. Living together with Hans Keilson perhaps afforded me more precise observation of Jewish gays like the Dutch poet Jacob Israel de Haan [who was murdered in Jerusalem in 1924], the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld and the Austrian writer Eduard Kulke. And of course we liked to discuss each other's texts. I don't see any clear 'influence,' but maybe there is some."

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