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The Jewish genius

By Neville Teller

IN THE UK, the name Norman Lebrecht brings with it connotations of the arts in general and classical music in particular. The many admirers he has acquired over his 40 years on the cultural scene might be surprised to learn that in the 1960s he attended both a yeshiva in Jerusalem and Bar-Ilan University.

He brings his scholarship, as well as his deep knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish world, to his latest work, *Genius and Anxiety: How Jews changed the world 1847-1947*.

This is unapologetically a book about Jews – scores of Jews whose lives and achievements made a significant difference to the world. In themselves, their histories make for fascinating reading, but a deeper theme informs these absorbing biographical sketches. As his title indicates, Lebrecht is exploring what might be termed “the Jewish genius.”

He is attempting to reveal what it is within the Jewish persona that drives individuals to contribute – whether they acknowledge their Jewish origins or reject them – far in excess of what might be expected from a tiny minority of humanity.

Lebrecht restricts his canvas to the century that ended just before the creation of the State of Israel. Casting his net wide, he selects 16 key years on which to hang his well-researched accounts of the lives and achievements of scores of people who sprang from Jewish stock. He hauls in a very large catch.

As he himself has written, “Jews made up less than 0.002 percent of the world’s population, but comprised around half of the most influential writers, musicians and filmmakers of this period, not to mention scientists (Einstein and Freud) and revolutionary thinkers (Marx and Wittgenstein).”

Among the scores of individuals that Lebrecht selects are a few who were deeply engaged with the Jewish world of their time. One such was Samson Raphael Hirsch, the doughty defender of modern Orthodoxy against the almost irresistible tide of Reform Judaism that overwhelmed Germany in the 19th century.

Another was Eliezer Perlman, the inventor of modern Hebrew, who later renamed himself Ben-Yehuda. Lebrecht provides a brief, but fascinating, insight into the sources Ben-Yehuda

plumbed for some words now common in Hebrew. *Hashmal* (electricity) he borrowed from a vision of the prophet Ezekiel. *Iton* (newspaper) comes from the German *zeitung*; *glida* (ice cream) from the Italian *gelato*. Ben-Yehuda’s achievement is extraordinary.

In 1881, no one in the Holy Land spoke Hebrew. In 2020, some 10 million have it as their mother tongue, and perhaps a further 10 million speak the language.

Lebrecht devotes his 1890 chapter to the towering figures of Simon Schechter and Theodor Herzl. Schechter is the scholar who unearthed long-lost treasures in the Cairo Genizah and who later endorsed the Zionist cause that was Herzl’s life work.

Jews concerned with Jewish matters, though, form only a small part of this eminently readable work. It begins, for example, with a chapter focused on the lives and achievements of a composer, a poet, an economist and a politician – Felix Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli. Hung on the year 1847, the history of these individuals demonstrates a determination in each to defend the Jewish dimension of their lives. When the Irish Catholic MP Daniel O’Connell denounced Disraeli as a descendant of the killers of Christ, Disraeli responded, “Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon.”

Elsewhere, Lebrecht selects the obscure as often as the renowned to illustrate his main thesis. Eliza Davies confronted Charles Dickens about his portrayal of the Jew Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. By persisting over the years she not only succeeded in getting the great man to amend a later edition of the book, but also to write a sympathetic Jewish character into his last work.

Not many people know the story of Emma Lazarus who, combining pride in being both a Jew and a patriotic American, penned the lines chosen to appear on the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

From the Holocaust years, Lebrecht selects the Ukrainian poet, Paul Celan, whose mother perished in Auschwitz, and Walter Ettinghaus-



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sen, a cryptographer at Britain’s highly secret Bletchley Park. Ettinghausen decoded a German message which revealed that Jews were being transported from Greece for “the final solution.” The information was passed directly to Winston Churchill. We read of the mental torment undergone by Elie Wiesel while in Auschwitz as a teenager, and for the rest of his life, trying to reconcile the idea of God with the horrors he had witnessed.

Lebrecht introduces other post-Holocaust thinkers who grappled with the same issue – the Hungarian Imre Kertesz, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum and the Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl.

Fascinating as Lebrecht’s book is, the question inherent in the title is not really resolved. That many people of Jewish origin have made a mighty contribution to the world in a great variety of fields is indisputable. Lebrecht does not claim to have identified what the magic ingredient common to all is, beyond the fact that in all their backgrounds stretch centuries of persecution, aspects of which most of them faced themselves. Is the resultant “Jewishness,” buried deep in the soul, sufficient to explain the drive, the creativity and the originality of thought that has distinguished so many? We are left to draw our own conclusions. ■