

An expatriate professor in New Zealand

A tribute to Dr. Norman Simms, (July 4, 1940-June 26th, 2022)



by Phyllis Chesler

Our people—and the world—have just lost a great *neshama*. Dr. Norman Simms z”l was a master midrashist and a literary scholar who wrote the most original volumes about Dreyfus, Marranos, (secret Jews), antisemitism, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—and about much, much else. He also wrote book reviews, such as one on [Women Fighters of the Holocaust](#) and [When Time Stopped: A story of Holocaust Detection.](#)

He was a poet and a storyteller. Norman was also a *landsman* of mine from Boro Park—and he wrote about that blessed hood in a series of pamphlets in a most charming way. “Half-Sour Pickles: More Stories from Boro Park.”

He remembers the El (Elevated Railway System), the movie theater on 47th Street, the barrels of half-sour and sour pickles, and Lenny’s candy store (which stood directly opposite our public school and right down the block from where I lived). He reminds us of the candies of that time: “little

wax bottles of some sweet, indescribably horrible liquid," "plastic lips, bright red and sensuous," "King Tut' candies...probably a mixture of licorice and cinnamon, you were able to smear on your face for war-paint."

Norman describes stuffing his little face with these candies as "An Ecstasy. Such a pleasure like little Marcel in his bed at Cambray ...never experienced. I don't even have to drink hot tea with a mushy cookie in it to feel the exalted state of being Lenny's could give you. Not a taste, but a memory."

Norman was the only one (besides me) who remembers the store on the corner of 13th Avenue and 43rd Street where one could buy a charlotte russe. Kol Ha Kavod.

Many years ago, Norman became an expatriate professor in New Zealand, where, at the time, there were no more than 6,000 Jews, many of whom were Holocaust survivors. Like other Jewish academics, he always kept a low and secular profile.

Oh, how that changed when Hans Joachim Kupka, a high official in the Neo-Nazi Bavarian Republican Partei, a man who maintains an anti-Jewish and Holocaust denial website, came to do his masters thesis on "The Use of German in New Zealand." All hell broke loose at the university. Bryan Gould, the vice-chancellor, branded Jewish academics, led by Dr. Simms, as "witch-hunters." Other administrators referred to the Jewish academics as "subterranean people" and as "uninvited outsiders."

Simms writes:

"The parents, grandparents, or other relations, and friends of many of the Jews who were calling attention to Kupka's hate mail on the internet had already lived through those persecutions by the witch-hunter supreme, Joe McCarthy. To call these (expatriate) academics who have devoted their lives to liberal causes and to the exposure of McCarthyite tactics, "witch hunters" was a hurtful, spiteful, and ugly

thing (to do). Second, to bring up the concept of witches in relation to Jews is to evoke archaic hatreds—the slurs that Jews are witches and magicians, worshippers of the Devil, who poison wells.”

Dr. Simm’s works, which includes poetry, aphorisms, anthologies, and truly major, major scholarly works need a home at a university archive. Here are some of his articles:

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Norman-Simms>

And here are some of his books:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/721010.Norman_Simms

The titles beguile: “New Midrashic Reading of Geoffrey Chaucer: His Life and Works;” “Cypto-Judaism: Madness and the Female Quixote. Charlotte Lennox as Marana in Mid-17th Century England;” “Jews in an Illusion of Paradise;” Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus in the Phantasmagoria;” “Ritual and Rhetoric.”

Norman was very generous, witty, quirky, and a man who examined and honored the Jewish past brilliantly and faithfully. God has just re-gained a very special soul—and that will have to sustain us.

I am also bereaved.

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