



BOOK
reviews

A HUMAN DOCUMENT

LIKE A SONG, LIKE A DREAM, by Alla Rusinek. Scribners, 267 pp. \$7.95.

This is a highly personalized story of one girl's emigration from Soviet Russia to Israel. But it is more than that: in detailing the hopes, difficulties and fulfillment of the current Russian aliyah that has brought some 60,000 Russian Jews to Israel in the past two years, it symbolizes this great mass movement that, aside from its humanitarian aspects, is so important to the development and growth of the Jewish State.

Alla, born a year after the State came into being, was educated as a Communist. It wasn't until she was eighteen, after the Six Day War, that she and some of her young friends first discovered their Jewish identity. She was among the first of Russia's Jews to apply for an exit visa. In the pattern that has become so familiar, she lost her job. But several years later, she was allowed to leave for Vienna, the first step in her aliyah.

Before she left Russia, the orphaned girl who belatedly discovered her Jewishness married Yossi. There were the pangs of separation, the uncertainty of whether he would ever be allowed to emigrate. But eventually, he, too, was allowed to go to Israel. Today, the young couple, with their child, are living in Israel.

This, a recital of the bare facts of a book that is a very human document, is a personalization of a crusade to which world Jewry is dedicated. In discovering her Judaism, in becoming a Zionist, Alla typifies the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews awaiting permission to go on aliyah. She gives flesh and blood to the world-wide Jewish effort in behalf of Soviet Jewry. She makes us proud of the little but significant part

we of the Diaspora can play. This book is inspirational in the simplicity of the story it tells. You will be the better Jew for the reading of it.

HENRY W. LEVY

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

TO BE . . . by Harold Flender. Manor Books (A paperback original) 256 pages. 95¢.

The literature of psychology, in all its varied forms, generally leaves me cold. The multifarious schools, the certainty of adherents, cancel each other out. Truth seems to be having its neck wrung by dogma. Ideologues too often seem to be engaged in some private poetic rite rather than the pursuit of science. Perhaps ultimately the chemist's test tube and not the psychiatrist's couch will offer the best hope of deliverance.

Under a headline proclaiming *Genes May Be the Villains*, science writer Earl Ubell reported in the Sunday Times last August 27th that a biologically-rooted chemical disturbance may be responsible for certain forms of mental illness: "an aberration of biology rather than . . . a psychic injury." Ubell concluded: "The chemists will now re-double their efforts to find the underlying chemical disturbance in both schizophrenia and manic depressive illness and if they find it, try to correct it just as they can correct the insulin lack in diabetes by supplying insulin."

Harold Flender, the author of *Rescue in Denmark*, the true story of the rescue of the Danish Jews during World War II, and *The Kids Who Went to Israel*, autobiographical sketches of young immigrants, as well as the maker of three documentary films on Youth Aliyah, Golda Meir, and Abba Eban, has in *To Be . . .* taken the words *psychotic depression* and given them flesh, bone, and arteries while, incidentally, paying chemo-therapy what appears to be its first novelistic dues. *To Be . . .*, however, adds up to considerably more than this; it is psychiatry in the round.

Widely-acclaimed concert violinist Emil Rocher is in the very prime of his life. His tours, which take him scurrying across the globe, fill his pockets with money, his arms with willing ladies. Waiting at home in their West End Avenue apartment is

wife Maya, with whom—despite his omnivorous philandering—Rocher truly shares a love affair, and their two normal, well-loved children. But Rocher is Jewish and the horrors of Auschwitz haunt him.

One day, out of the blue, he tries to kill himself; the success-prone Rocher, carefully preparing a bathtub full of warm water, almost succeeds: "I stepped into the tub . . . I lay down. Fine? Perfect. Nothing had felt so good in my life. Warm, sensual, erotic. I picked up the sliver of glass and slashed my right wrist. I bled, but it wasn't deep enough, didn't hurt enough, didn't bleed enough. I heard myself saying within my head: 'Come on, you can do better than that!' I slashed again, so deeply my body shivered . . ."

The end? Rocher's erratic behaviour has alerted his in-laws and the unconscious violinist is salvaged from his bloody tub, still alive. River Clinic, an eminently civilized institution providing all kinds of advanced therapy, is Rocher's home for the next eight months. It is here, under the tutelage of pipe-smoking, granite-visaged Dr. Turner, that the bewildered Rocher delves into his past, undergoes electric shock treatments, confronts his new environment, and tries as best as he can to get his head together. Rocher ostensibly makes progress, but: "One afternoon, having lunch . . . I wiped clean the table knife I had been using and plunged it into my neck as far as it would go."

What sets *To Be . . .* apart from the field is its uncompromising honesty. It is fiction that reads like a memoir, that has the unmistakable ring of emotional truth. There is nothing hokey about it. The result is a compelling, moving—yes, disturbing—inside track experience, one as enlightening as it is difficult to shake off.

Along with Rocher we learn the ropes, are made privy to the minutiae of life at River Clinic: there are seven floors in all, each strikingly different, with its own rules and regulations, the top a fish bowl where every movement, even bowel, must be observed and recorded by the omnipresent staff; as a patient undergoes therapy he works his way down, floor by floor, toward greater freedom and, hopefully, mental health.

Rapid flashbacks detail Rocher's

history, the hurly-burly Manhattan cultural scene peopled, not surprisingly, by our very own friends and acquaintances who—in sharp, incisive vignettes—swiftly bow on and off stage. Simple, yet complex. For like gas seeping through a crack in the kitchen stove, ambivalence throws a dangerous cloud over the issues. This is one of the novel's main strengths. *Certainty?* Not here. Take Dr. Turner, whose approach is conspicuously traditional: is he right in ardently probing Rocher's sex life, his marital relationship? Or is he needlessly driving his patient up the wall? Is Rocher's view of himself and the world so askew as to be totally misleading? The prescribed shock therapy, could it be the *wrong* treatment? And how much of River Clinic itself is mere twaddle? What emerges beyond doubt in Flender's tale is the benevolent—indeed miraculous—effects of chemo-therapy, a pause-giving testament that has all the earmarks of a straight scoop.

Published without fanfare as a paperback original by Manor Books, a fledgling concern, *To Be . . .* may very well be overlooked by its potential public. It shouldn't be.

ISIDORE HAIBLUM

THE ISRAEL

