

What *The Bellarosa Connection* Connects

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Since the end of the Second World War, Jewish writers have made a conspicuous contribution to American literature with their Jewish ways of thinking as well as in many other ways. Saul Bellow is one of those outstanding writers. Jewishness is characteristic of his works reflecting his ethnic background.

For examples, in *The Victim* (1947), Bellow explores the problem of discrimination, from the special case against Jewish people to the universal aspects in modern society, depicting subtle feelings and emotions of the discriminators and the discriminated. In *Herzog* (1964), which is labeled his most Jewish novel by some critics, the protagonist, Moses Herzog, is saved at last from his personal crisis in mid-life by the deep memories of his Jewish background (Rosenthal 334).

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), the protagonist is a Jewish intellectual, a Polish-Jewish refugee who survived the Holocaust. His experience of suffering plays an important role in his perception of mankind and the world around him. About twenty years later, in *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), Bellow takes up a victim of the Holocaust just as in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, but in a rather different way, focusing on Jewry in contemporary America and Jewishness itself rather than the victim himself.

Billy Rose, a prominent Jewish producer in Broadway, formed a secret organization during the Second World War and saved Jews out of wartime Italy. One of the saved is Harry Fonstein, an important character in this novella. Thus, Harry escaped from the threat of death by Hitler, first came to Cuba, where he met a Jewish woman named Sorella and married her, and then to the United States with her, building a successful business there. Harry strongly desired to meet his benefactor, Billy Rose, to thank him in person. It seems quite natural for anyone to wish to do so, and especially important for a Jewish person, who highly values memory. He tried again and again to arrange a meeting with Billy, but he was always flatly rebuffed and had to give up meeting and thanking him to his great regret.

However, his wife Sorella did not give up. She thought that Billy should naturally accept her husband's sincere desire to thank him in person and felt it her obligation to her husband to get him to have an opportunity to meet Billy. She managed to obtain a document revealing Billy's sexual inadequacies and unsavory business dealings, recorded by his deceased love and secretary who died reproaching him for his deserting her.

In the late 1950s, about ten years after Harry Fonstein came to America, Sorella anticipates Billy's arrival in Jerusalem and blackmails him with the document into meeting her husband, demanding him to spare only fifteen minutes so that her husband

may acknowledge his indebtedness. Meeting Sorella for a short time there in Jerusalem, Billy will not admit his rescue of Harry and refuses to meet him. To her claim and reproach, he admits his rescue operations at last and explains his position :

I did all I could. And for that point of time, that's more than most can say. Go holler at Stephen Wise. Raise hell with Sam Rosenman. Guys were sitting on their hands. They would call on Roosevelt and Cordell Hull, who didn't care a damn for Jews, and they were so proud and happy to be close enough to the White House, even getting the runaround was such a delicious privilege.... There were refugees by the hundred thousands to ship to Palestine. Or there wouldn't have been a state here today. That's why I gave up the single-party rescue operation and started to raise money to get through the British blockade in those rusty Greek tramp ships. (54)

Thus, Billy Rose surely deserves admiration and appreciation for his apparent humanitarian, courageous and noble deed which powerful and influential statesmen like Roosevelt and Churchill neglected. However, curiously he rejects Sorella's natural and rather reserved request that he should meet Fonstein and accept his gratitude. Sorella earnestly explains her point, even using his girlfriend's secret journal to put her through to him. But he turns his back on her, and his answer is, 'I don't need entanglements—what I did, I did. I have to keep down the number of relationships and contacts. What I did for you, take it and welcome, but spare me the relationship and all the rest of it' (56). It seems that Billy hates to have relationships with other Jews. He gives no other reasons why he refuses to meet Fonstein. Sorella has to give up, saying, "I don't want my husband to talk to the likes of you" (63).

Billy's motive and intention is depicted ambiguously and rather enigmatically. It may not be intended to be purely humanitarian, the reader can suppose, but somewhat theatrical, judging from his later indifferent attitude toward the people he had rescued. Peter Hyland suggests in this respect :

Rose's actions in the story remain something of a puzzle. The real-life Billy Rose was a song-writer and impresario, a night-club owner, a producer of Broadway spectacles of immense vulgarity. He was, that is, associated with the kind of escapist vision of life represented in the novella by Broadway, Hollywood and Las Vegas. Thus the fictional scheme for rescuing Jews from Fascist Europe is directly associated with such fantasy : 'He must've seen Leslie Howard in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*' (Ch. 1), the narrator suggests, and even the romantic sound of the conversion of Rose's misheard name to 'Bellarosa' holds something of this. (Hyland 115)

Thus, Billy's rescue actions may be not only real but also virtual, theatrical and fantastic for himself.

Billy's remark about his rescue actions as quoted above must have a double meaning. It literally implies the author's great regret for the Holocaust and also for everyone sitting on his hands overlooking the atrocities and miseries, expressed indirectly through Billy's mouth. No influential Jewish people and reverend rabbis in America made any efforts, Billy stresses, even though they could take some measures to make influential politicians take some actions to rescue Jews in Europe. Roosevelt and Cordell Hull on their parts were very indifferent to the fate of Jewish people. Billy's clam is very important and significant.

However, this is Billy's official and ostensible stance even though it is to the point and plausible. What actually drove him to the rescue operations for Jewish people in Italy was probably his theatrical fantasy. Showing this to be true, the narrator discloses the circumstances around Billy at that time, while expressing himself at the end of the novella :

Yes, she was talking of me and of Billy Rose. For Fonstein was Fonstein—he was Mitteleuropa. I, on the other hand, was from the Eastern Seaboard—born in New Jersey, educated at Washington Square College, a big mnemonic success in Philadelphia. I was a Jew of an entirely different breed. And therefore (yes, go on, you can't avoid it now) closer to Billy Rose and his rescue operation, the personal underground inspired by *The Scarlet Pimpernel*—the Hollywood of Leslie Howard, who acted the Pimpernel, substituted for the Hollywood of Douglas Fairbanks. (89)

At this point it has become very clear that Billy Rose was induced to try his rescue operations inspired by this Hollywood movie whose story was based on the original novel with the same title *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) by Baroness Orczy. In this novel, the hero with the false name of Scarlet Pimpernel smuggled out of the country foreign people who were threatened to death. The reader has so far been puzzled by Billy's behavior of refusing to meet the rescued Jews, but now has been brought to light at last at this point of the story.

The story in this novella is told to the reader by an anonymous narrator as his recollection. Though unnamed the reader learns much about him. He was born in New Jersey of a Russian Jewish family. He has an extraordinary innate power of memories, and turned it into a business. As a founder of the Mnemosyne Institute in Philadelphia, he has trained many executives, politicians and members of the defense establishment for forty years, being successful in business and building a great fortune. He married a woman of an old Anglo-Saxon Protestant family. Now he is in seventies, widowed and retired, leaving the Institute in the hands of his son. He lives alone in a large mansion in Philadelphia.

He met the Fonsteins twice in his life. He first met them, when Harry Fonstein, the nephew of his stepmother came to the United States via Cuba from Italy. Then, more

than ten years later, he happened to meet them at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, where Billy Rose also stayed with Isamu Noguchi, an architectural sculptor, for the purpose of donating a sculpture garden there. This was the last time he saw them. At the time of his narrative, an unexpected occurrence made him call the Fonsteins and find that they died in a car accident six months earlier when they were heading for Atlantic City to help their son, Gilbert, who had trouble through gambling. Gilbert had been thought to be a prodigy in mathematics. Ironically enough, his interest in probability eventually made him a miserable gambler.

As it is evident from the development of the story, memory itself plays a very important and significant role in this novella. Marilyn R. Satlof notes that "in this novel Bellow depicts several dangling men who, through a loss of communal memory, have become alienated from the Jewish people. Judaism itself stresses memory with both Biblical and rabbinic injunctions." (Satlof 177)

The Hebrew word *zakhar* meaning "remember" appears throughout the Bible more than one hundred and sixty times mostly with Israel or God as the subject according to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Thus, Judaism and its collective memory are inseparably bound by the covenant. (Satlof 177)

When the narrator was young, his father took to Fonstein, probably hoping that his son would meet a Jew with important Jewish memories and history and that it would help his son leave his American rootlessness. The narrator recalls the time when he first met Fonstein :

I could see why my father took to Fonstein. Fonstein had survived the greatest ordeal of Jewish history. He still looked as if the worst, even now, would not take him by surprise. The impression he gave was unusually firm. When he spoke to you he engaged your look and held it. This didn't encourage small talk. Still, there were hints of wit at the corners of his mouth and around the eyes. So you didn't want to play the fool with Fonstein. I sized him up as a Central European Jewish type. He saw me, probably, as an immature unstable Jewish American, humanly ignorant and loosely kind : in the history of civilization, something new in the way of human types, perhaps not so bad as it looked at first. (7)

Thus, in this early stage of the novella, there can be seen a significant and striking contraposition, that is, a survivor of the Holocaust versus a common Jewish American. One has survived the greatest ordeal of Jewish history and has his memories as his indispensable and essential quality ingrained in his mind. The other is rootlessly deprived of his people's ethnic memories and history, though he has an extraordinary innate gift of memory and has used it successfully as a practical means of business. This contraposition may imply one of the most important themes of the work.

Sorella's typical Jewish attitude contrasts sharply with the narrator's. He depicts her

when they are talking about the problem :

She was well up on the subject, and besides, damn it, you couldn't say no to Jewish history after what had happened in Nazi Germany. You had to listen. It turned out that as the wife of a refugee she had set herself to master the subject, and I heard a great deal from her about the technics of annihilation, the large-scale-industry aspect of it. (28)

She was intent on pondering Billy's rescue of Fonstein, the history of the Jews and what she should do for Fonstein, the rescued, while the narrator, tired of hearing what she was saying and thinking, wished Fonstein would forget all about it and devote himself to his business, writing as follows :

Also my advice to Fonstein—given mentally—was : Forget it. Go American. Work at your business. Market your thermostats. Leave the theory side of it to your wife. She has a taste for it, and she's a clever woman. If she enjoys collecting a Holocaust library and wants to ponder the subject, why not? Maybe she'll write a book herself, about the Nazis and the entertainment industry. Death and mass fantasy. (29)

There seems to be an unbridgeable gap of understanding between the Fonsteins and the narrator.

Thus, the story implies a profound insight into the deep crevice in American Jews between the Americanized Jews and the defenders of Jewish traditions, "stubborn defensive rationalizers who deny that they misuse their talents and insist that they can face God with a clear conscience" (2), as the narrator puts it. The narrator is one of the typically Americanized Jews just like Billy Rose. He began his life as the child of Russian Jews from New Jersey. His great fortune made by his commercial use of memory enabled him to marry a WASP lady and become a Philadelphian, getting away from his father and his Jewish origins. He admits :

I had married a WASP lady, and my father and I had quarreled. I was a Philadelphian now, without contacts in New Jersey. New Jersey to me was only a delay en route to New York or Boston. A psychic darkness. Whenever possible I omitted New Jersey. (38)

He was rather willing to be Americanized, terming New Jersey, his ethnic root, a psychic darkness, omitting it as much as possible.

On the other hand, Sorella Fonstein is the chief defender of Jewish traditions. But she is depicted somewhat comically and ironically through the eyes of the narrator. For example, he describes her in part as follows :

Sorella was a New Jersey girl—correction : lady. She was very heavy and she

wore makeup. Her cheeks were downy. Her hair was done up in a beehive. A pince-nez, highly unusual, a deliberate disguise, gave her a theatrical air. She was still a novice then, trying on these props. Her aim was to achieve an authoritative, declarative manner. However, she was no fool. (6)

Sorella is the moral center of the story, fully understanding Fonstein's suffering as one of the most important Jewish memories. The comic and ironical treatment of her obesity, beehive coif and preposterous pince-nez never spoils the dignity and significance of what she represents. Rather the comical treatment is necessary. It is the rejection and humiliation that her immensity brought upon her in the past that enabled her to have imaginative identification with Fonstein's suffering and to be aware of the vital gravity of preserving memory. (Hyland 117)

This is a very important point, indeed. Here is the very reason why the writer should create such an extraordinarily obese woman. Obesity may well be the last thing a woman desires. No wonder she must have had a lot of hardships because of her physical makeup.

After being saved by Bellarosa the Connection, Fonstein was detained at Ellis Island. Refugees were not admitted then. He had to go to Havana, Cuba, where he spent several years. The following is to show what kind of place it was supposed to be :

To tourists, Havana was a holiday town for gambling, drinking, and whoring— an abortion center as well. Unhappy single girls came down from the States to end their love pregnancies. Others, more farsighted, flew in to look among the refugees for husbands and wives. Find a spouse of a stable European background, a person schooled in suffering and endurance. Somebody who had escaped death. Women who found no takers in Baltimore, Kansas City, or Minneapolis, worthy girls to whom men never proposed, found husbands in Mexico, Honduras, and Cuba. (18)

Sorella may well be classified into those women. Fonstein's employer in Havana sent for Sorella, his niece, to marry Fonstein. It was really a marriage of convenience. Sorella wanted a husband, while Fonstein needed U. S. naturalization papers.

In spite of her strenuous efforts, Sorella's attempt apparently failed at last. Billy Rose would not associate with Harry Fonstein. Why did Rose refuse her sincere and earnest request? To this question the narrator suggests two answers. First he says, "Billy views everything as show biz. Nothing is real that isn't a show. And he wouldn't perform in your show because he's a producer, and producers don't perform" (65). Then, he adds, "Maybe the most interesting thing about Billy is that he wouldn't meet with Harry. He wasn't able to be the counterexample in a case like Harry's. Couldn't begin to measure up" (65).

Peter Hyland considers the unfavorable result of Sorella's attempt to have a double

meaning :

Her climactic recognition that Billy Rose is not fit in to associate with her husband is in one sense a triumph, a demonstration of her own superiority, but it is also an admission of her defeat by American spiritual vacuity. As a defeat it was prefigured by the narrator, who in response to her attempts to get him to think about the Holocaust refused her challenge : 'I didn't want to think of the history and psychology of these abominations, death chambers and furnaces' (Ch. 1). (Hyland 117)

According to the narrator's interpretation, which seems persuasive, Billy Rose acknowledges to himself that he did his rescue operation only from his theatrical interest, fantasy and impulse and not from any noble intention or humanitarian consideration. He considers himself to be Americanized, rather indifferent to his ethnic traditions. Thus, he knows well that he does not deserve any praise or gratitude for what he did or what he is.

Answering the narrator's remarks about Rose's final refusal, Sorella says :

That may be a little more like it. But if you want my basic view, here it is :
The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them. I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the next test—America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U. S. A. be too much for them ? (65)

This question of hers implies the most important theme reverberating throughout the novella. For the question, however, the ending of the story is very ambiguous, allowing conflicting interpretations. David Denby, for example, is very negative saying, "The answer, in this story at least, is yes, it's too much. Realizing too late the meaning of his recollections of the Fonsteins, the memory expert asks God to remember them" (Denby 333).

The last episode is surely negative. The Fonsteins' only son Gilbert has been their great hope, showing a genius in mathematics, regarded as a prodigy. Unfortunately, however, he comes to be interested in probability factors in gambling. He takes to gambling, using for it his mathematical genius in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Eventually he falls into a serious trouble.

In order to save their fond son from the trouble, the Fonsteins hurry to Atlantic City from New York, Sorella driving as a mother in a terrible hurry. They get involved in a car accident. They are killed instantly. In short, it can be said that the Americanized prodigal son ruined his parents, respectable Jews who had valued and preserved their racial traditions, and survived hardships in Europe, vividly symbolizing modern American civilization destroying some essential values in Judaism and Jewishness.

At the news of this disaster, the narrator is determined to choose to record

everything he can remember of the Bellarosa Connection, thinking that 'if sleep is forgetting, forgetting is also sleep, and sleep is to consciousness what death is to life. So that the Jews ask even God to remember' (102). He seems to come to realize that what Billy Rose did was part of noble, precious Jewish traditions, however Americanized he might be and whatever his motive and intention might be. This may be in a sense an attempt at the reconciliation between Americanism and Judaism.

Bellow's protagonists are sometimes in parallel to himself in age and concerns. When *The Bellarosa Connection* was published, Bellow was seventy-five, and the narrator is seventy-two, nearly the same. Thus, this old nameless narrator not only implies general Americanized Jews but also the writer himself, who values Jewishness and tries to retain it in American culture.

Works Cited

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