

Debating “Demidenko”

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Since the novel *The Hand That Signed The Paper*² received the 1995 Miles Franklin Award, Australia’s “most coveted prize for fiction”,³ discussion of its merits has served as a platform for a wide range of literary, political and social comment. Peter Coleman, writing in *The Adelaide Review*, described the debate over the merits of the novel as “a dialogue of the deaf”,⁴ but this writer contends that far from being a matter of dialogue, the debate involves a number of parallel discussions on issues which are occasionally, but not necessarily, related.

The novel, and the kudos it received, have provided pretexts for debates on a number of matters of human rights interest. There has been debate on the merit of legislation, enacted by the Hawke Labor government, to allow for trials in Australia of residents alleged to have participated in the Nazi Genocide in Europe 50 years ago; on the question of individual responsibility and free will in the commission of criminal acts; on the acceptability, in multicultural Australia, of “cultural defences” for behaviour or attitudes which contravene that which is legally or morally acceptable; on different attitudes to the responsibility of artists, particularly when their creativity broaches matters of such central moral relevance as the Holocaust; and on the causes (and therefore the remedies) for antisemitism/racism. This paper asserts that these debates have moral and political implications for contemporary Australia.⁵

Australia’s Nazi War Crimes Trials

While the novel’s “action” is largely set in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, it is the Australian protagonist, Fiona, who is forced to come to terms with her family’s history by the trial, in a South Australian court, of a person alleged to have participated in the Nazi Genocide.⁶

The legislation under which this trial was held, the *War Crimes Amendment Act* (Cth) 1988, was preceded by a lengthy public debate, in which members of Australia’s Ukrainian and Jewish communities played an active part. Building on

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² Demidenko H, *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (Allen & Unwin, 1994).

³ Oakley B, “Staying power wins author a literary marathon”, *The Australian*, 2 June 1995.

⁴ Coleman P, “War crime fiction”, *The Adelaide Review*, August 1995.

⁵ Although this writer has strong opinions on other matters related to the broad subject of the novel (such as its literary merit; the novelist’s deceitful behaviour; and the implications for inter-communal relations in contemporary Australia) these issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ A brief summary of the political process leading to the passage of legislation and the first trial appears in Bevan D, *A Case to Answer: The Story of Australia’s First European War Crimes Prosecution* (Wakefield Press, Adelaide 1994) pp 18-26.

the solid working relationship established during campaigns against the Soviet Union's abuses of human rights, the roof bodies of the organised Jewish and Ukrainian communities in Australia, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, presented a joint position endorsing the prosecution of individuals against whom there existed strong prima facie cases of participation in crimes against humanity.⁷

By the time the public debate led to stirrings of political action, the broadly accepted moral statement that Australia had a responsibility to act against residents who had taken advantage of our post-war immigration policy to find a refuge from prosecution for crimes committed during the course of the Nazi genocide, became subsumed in debates concerning practicalities, technicalities and the utility of action in Australia.

Antagonists disputed the necessity for legislation, the "fairness" in conducting trials against participants in Genocide more than 40 years after the commission of crimes, the introduction of laws with a degree of "retrospectivity"⁸ and the specific terms of the Act.⁹ The Liberal/National Party Coalition formally opposed the legislation in the Senate, and some government senators have indicated that they were less than happy with the final draft of the Bill that they were bound, by caucus solidarity, to support.¹⁰

Under the legislation, 841 individuals were investigated by the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) of the Attorney-General's Department. Three men were charged but not convicted, with a number of other briefs near completion when the SIU was closed down, in accordance with its original terms of establishment, in 1992. In May 1994 the final report of the War Crimes Commission was belatedly released. It contained ample evidence to support the view that an unspecified number, perhaps hundreds, of war criminals entered Australia as part of the post-war mass immigration and that government inaction had allowed them to escape any form of punishment or even inconvenience for more than 40 years.¹¹

⁷ See Jones J, "War Crimes: Fact and Fiction", *Australia/Israel Review*, 28 September-18 October 1994. The president of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations reaffirmed their policy in a letter published in *The Age*, 26 June 1995.

⁸ This matter was discussed at length by the judges who heard the High Court challenge to the Act's constitutionality, *Polyukhovich v The Commonwealth* (1991) 172 CLR 501.

⁹ See Bevan, *op cit*, p 22, who cites the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne David Penman counselling the parliament against punishing murderers of Jews in the Holocaust, as this would make us a "people committed to vengeance" and Alf Garland, president of the Returned Services League, arguing "You can't try people for 1940s crimes with a 1980s morality. We are not making people guilty of crimes that at the time they did not know were crimes".

¹⁰ The chairman of the Federal Labor Party's legal committee at the time of the drafting of the relevant legislation, Senator Terry Aulich, wrote of his own concerns when the matter came before parliament, in the course of a vigorous promotion of the novel. Aulich T, "Breaking unwritten codes in society", *The Canberra Times*, 22 July 1995.

¹¹ For more details, see Bevan *op cit*; Ricketson M, "Selective Amnesia", *Eureka Street*, August 1994; Mark Hearn, "Monsters No More?", *Southland*, Winter 1994; Devine F, "War crimes trawl

Confusing Perpetrators with Victims

In 1993, the writer of the novel, using the name "Helen Demidenko",¹² wrote to *The Bulletin* magazine, in support of David McNicoll's attack on trials of individuals alleged to have committed crimes against humanity, claiming that "Jews and Ukrainians share a long history of suffering at the hands of Tsarist and Communist regimes (and sometimes at the hands of each other)".¹³ The implication that the Jewish community in the Ukraine had been culpable in a cycle of hatred, should have been sufficient warning that Demidenko's understanding of the history of Jewish-Ukrainian relations left a great deal to be desired, but in the novel she went much further, sympathetically depicting criminals' aberrant behaviour as normative and justifiable.¹⁴ It is difficult to conclude other than that Demidenko sought her readers to accept that the crimes of the Holocaust were nothing more than justifiable, if moderately disproportionate, revenge.¹⁵

Writing in *The Age*, Geoffrey Gray of the Faculty of Aboriginal and Islander Studies at the University of Adelaide said of this thesis:

The victim is confused with the murderer. Primo Levi sums it up: 'I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic

11—Continued

failed to net monsters in our midst", *The Australian*, 16 June 1994; Greenwood R, "Our Failure on Nazi War Criminals in Australia", *Australia/Israel Review*, 1-31 January, 1995.

- 12 On August 19, 1995, David Bentley of Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* revealed that the writer of the novel was the daughter of two English migrants, Harry and Grace Darville, and had misled acquaintances, lecturers, the literary establishment and the Australian public into believing her novel drew in part on family oral history, and also that she had travelled to The Ukraine, was familiar with the language and was qualified to comment on the Australian Ukrainian community's "habits". Demidenko had made her false identity extremely important, see Mitchell S, "Demidenko life fiction goes too far", *The Australian*, 24 August 1995. The writer's pseudonym, "Demidenko", is the name of a participant in the barbarous mass murder of Jews at Babi Yar, near Kiev, identified by eye-witnesses (see Kuznetsov A, (trans David Floyd), *Babi Yar*, (Penguin, 1982), and later appearing, with embellishment, in literature as a character in D M Thomas' novel *The White Hotel* see Henderson G "Faction, fiction or propaganda: Ozlit should be blushing", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1995.

- 13 Demidenko H, "Forum", *The Bulletin*, 1 June 1993.

- 14 Bone found the novel "offensive", because "it comes dangerously close to arguing that the Jews deserved what was done to them by those Ukrainians who collaborated with the Nazis; and because it makes a sympathetic figure out of a man who not only willingly participated in the machine-gunning of thousands of people but who could plunge a bayonet into a baby", *The Age*, 30 June 1995.

- 15 Even the most solid and committed of the writer's supporters read the book's thesis as one based on "revenge". For example, Andrew Stafford, described as "a long-time friend of Helen Demidenko", wrote "Apparently the obvious needs to be restated: The Hand That Signed the Paper is a novel about revenge - and its futility", *The Australian*, 18 July 1995.

affection [sic] or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth'.¹⁶

On the same theme, Peter Christoff argued 'To engage our sympathies and draw us towards this view of the killers as victims, the novel displaces the Jews, Ukrainians and Russian POWs who are the real victims of slaughter but who appear as mere ciphers in it. It is a nauseating manoeuvre.'¹⁷

The moral logic of the story is that we should not judge any crime, even multiple murder, if we can not "feel" for the perpetrator — but if we feel for the perpetrator we will not see the behaviour as necessarily deserving of punishment. Murder and other crimes committed by the novelist's Kovalenkos were crimes when they were committed. Despite the impression conveyed by the novel, enthusiastic participation in brutality was not the average person's response to the Ukrainian famine. It is instructive to contrast the novel's morality with that of Marko Pavlyshyn, a senior lecturer in Ukrainian Studies at Monash University, who argued, in the course of giving his (negative) verdict on the novel "I find very questionable the idea that if something is understandable, such as an act of revenge, that somehow the responsibility of people who participated in it is diminished".¹⁸

The Morality and Logic of the Prosecution of War Criminals

In the light of the immensely important discussions surrounding the establishment of international mechanisms for dealing with murderous "war criminals" in Africa and the Balkans, the proposition that there are no objective crimes and that mass murderers should be "understood" rather than judged, is of prime concern to those who believe that the establishment of a moral regime is a human rights imperative.¹⁹ Diane Orenlichter, an international law specialist at American University, Washington, argued for the importance of prosecutions of the war criminals in contemporary Africa and the Balkans: "If they are not . . . then we really don't have a law against genocide. And if these aren't crimes against humanity, what are?"²⁰

Commenting on this observation, Pamela Bone wrote

"However difficult or futile it seems, war criminals must be brought to justice whenever they can be. People who commit horrible crimes can be forgiven, after they have served whatever sentences a court deems fit (which does not

¹⁶ "Stereotypes and moral confusion", *The Age*, 29 June 1995.

¹⁷ Christoff P, "Demidenko panel's choice reveals a serious lack of judgment", *The Australian*, 14 July 1995.

¹⁸ Quoted in Legge K, "The Demidenko Affair", *The Weekend Australian*, 15 July 1995.

¹⁹ Bone P wrote "I refuse to excuse mass murder by saying we are all capable of it. Because most people are damned well not capable of it", *The Age*, 9 June 1995. See also Tatz C, *Reflections on the Politics of Remembering and Forgetting*, Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies, Macquarie University, 1995.

²⁰ Bone P, "We must show war criminals that all is not forgiven", *The Age*, 30 June 1995.

include capital punishment, in my opinion) and if they have shown remorse. However, I suspect many war criminals never feel remorse, whether they are caught or not, but spend the rest of their lives rationalising their crimes and blaming their victims."²¹

In light of the Demidenko controversy, Louise Adler, Arts Editor of *The Age*, made a personal comment which bears repeating in this context. "I now understand the world to be divided between those who believe in the banality of evil and those who believe that evil is decidedly not ordinary and that collaboration should be viewed as an act of monstrous complicity."²² The logic of international law dealing with crimes against humanity is steeped in the latter view having moral authority.

The "Cultural Defence"

When criticised for her historically inaccurate depictions and racist stereotyping, "Demidenko" responded by asserting that her novel was based on the folk-memory of her family, transmitted orally.²³ This claim, originally accepted at face value, led commentators to accept the alleged "understandable ethnic reasons" for which the novelist sought to discover "why certain Ukrainians became involved, as lower level functionaries, in the Nazi genocide attempt against the Jews".²⁴ Although this misrepresentation has now been fully exposed, the way this "defence" was discussed remains a matter for serious concern. Similarities with discussions of female genital mutilation are apposite.

Female genital mutilation is undeniably present in some cultures today, including a number with representation in Australia. It has had a place in the world view of members of particular communities for generations. To question its practise can be perceived by group members to be attacking the integrity and decency of beloved family members. In a culturally diverse society, a range of beliefs and traditions is not only tolerated but encouraged. Unfortunately, bigotry and prejudice often cloud understanding of cultural practises which can comfortably co-exist with others and breach no law or moral standard. However, when practises come into conflict with basic principles of human rights, as is the case with female genital mutilation, it becomes the responsibility of educators and legislators to do their utmost to bring it to an end.

Considering the issue of a "general cultural defence" in its review of Multiculturalism and the Law, the Australian Law Reform Commission noted that

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Australian Book Review*, August 1995.

²³ This defence was used on a number of occasions, exemplified in her discussion with Marjory Bennett in *The Sun-Herald*, 7 August 1994.

²⁴ Robert Manne, editor of *Quadrant*, writing in *Australian Book Review*, August 1995 made this concession in an otherwise strident criticism of the novel.

“such a defence would violate the principles of equality before the law and equal protection of the law”.²⁵

This debate goes to the very heart of multiculturalism, due to the imputation that views held by one section of the community have a certain inviolability merely because they are part of culture or historic memory. In this specific case, the interchangeability of “Jews” with “Bolsheviks”²⁶ was held out as a legitimate belief of a group of Australians, even by critics.²⁷ To criticise such a view was in some quarters presented as opposition to legitimate cultural expression,²⁸ if not worse.²⁹ In Australia in the 1990s antisemitism is viewed as archetypal racism, sourced in ignorance and demonstrably destructive. While there are, quite properly, vigorous discussions as to how best to deal with its existence and defend potential victims from its continuing harm, it is rare indeed to find it defended as nothing more sinister than an expression of ethnic identity.

It is important that the same principles applied to an act such as female genital mutilation apply to behaviour which adversely affects the ability of a group of Australians to live free from vilification.³⁰ If it is wrong for any Australian to disseminate anti-Jewish propaganda, it must be wrong for all Australians, regardless of “culture”, to do so. To leave antisemitism unchallenged is to indulge in the type of “Multiculturalism to end multiculturalism, at least as any sort of ideal”.³¹

The Responsibility of Artists

As the debate concerning the book raged in the media, a number of Ukrainian community leaders, supported by the historic record, contended that the Ukrainians depicted in the book were not representative and directly confronted the novelist on her negative stereotyping of Ukrainians.³² Holocaust survivors, historians and other

²⁵ ALRC. *Report No. 57: Multiculturalism and the Law*, 1992, p 171.

²⁶ Made on more than 20 occasions in *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, and by the writer in radio, television and newspaper interviews and articles in the debate following the Miles Franklin Award.

²⁷ David Greason, literary editor of the *Herald Sun* and a strident critic of the book and the judges of literary awards it received, said “To a certain extent, the implicit antisemitism of the book would have been understandable had it come from someone who had taken in such justifications from childhood.” Greason D, “Time for an apology”, *Herald Sun*, 22 August 1995.

²⁸ An example is the claim by George Papellinas, editor of *RePublica*, that critics of the novel at times displayed “the ignorance and even the fundamentalist stupidity of [Salman] Rushdie’s critics” as “inherited conflicts and opposing realities, subjective ones, are part of our multicultural character”, *Australian Book Review*, August 1995.

²⁹ Literary critic Gerard Windsor attacked an imagined “well-funded witch hunt against people who remind us of what fellow Australians once felt and passionately believed”, *Ibid*.

³⁰ Some critics argued that in effect that the writer had been guilty of racism not only towards Jews, in that she depicted her central, Ukrainian, characters as people devoid of the knowledge of what and what is not moral. See, for example, Birsksy B “Amorality is no basis for an historical novel”, *The Australian*, 10 July 1995.

³¹ Flanagan M, “A good critic must be a good writer first”, *The Age*, 5 August 1995.

³² Greason D, “Helen Darville, the teller of tall tales”, *Herald-Sun*, 26 August 1995.

authorities on the period presented a mountain of evidence that exposed the inaccuracies in the "history" which informed the novel.³³ In response to these interventions, defenders of the book argued that the real issue was that of the relationship of the artist to society, and artists' responsibility.

The Miles Franklin judges originally defended the novel's "strong sense of history",³⁴ but when the writer's history was affirmed as bunk, they, together with other advocates of the novel's worth, reverted to the defence that fiction, being "imagination", is permitted to exist as if in a social, historical, philosophical and moral vacuum. As Peter Christoff wrote:

"With the notable exception of Roger McDonald, its judges have either given little thought to whether the novel is anti-Semitic, amoral or a seriously distorted interpretation of historic events ... or are little concerned about such considerations, seeing them as unimportant to their assessment of the novel's 'literary qualities'".³⁵

One of the concerns expressed in discussions of various federal and state governments' models for legislation to deal with racism has been the existence of extremely generous escape clauses for "art". The Australian Arabic Council, for example, expressed objections to the federal *Racial Hatred Bill* 1994, due to its perceived failure to counter pervasive stereotyping in the popular media.³⁶ The Executive Council of Australian Jewry also expressed concern at the broad licence accorded to the artists by the legislation.³⁷

The place of popular culture in creating and reinforcing stereotypes is recognised by educators and the media.³⁸ It is not, apparently, accepted by a number of literary critics and commentators.³⁹ In a forceful piece, Professor David Myers criticised commentators who excused blatant inaccuracy verging on racial slander. He argued that regardless of the fact that historical events can have a number of interpretations,

³³ Associate Professor Judith Armstrong, of the University of Melbourne, was a notable exception. See Armstrong J, "Swords Cross Over the terror of words", *The Age*, 17 June 1995.

³⁴ This is a quote from the official judges' report. Austin Gough, a former university lecturer on the Second World War, noted that the novel was repeatedly praised for its authenticity, which proved nothing other than the appalling ignorance concerning history and contemporary antisemitism of these reviewers. Gough A, "Never mind veracity, feel the art", *The Hobart Mercury*, 26 August 1995

³⁵ *Australian Book Review*, August 1995.

³⁶ See, for example *The Senate Hansard* of the Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee, Reference: Racial Hatred Bill (Cth) 1994, Friday, 24 February 1995, pp 377-381 and 392-394.

³⁷ *The submission of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry in relation to the Racial Discrimination Amendment Bill (1992)* argued that no "public act" should be exempted, on the basis of artistic freedom, from anti-racism laws specifically "where the perpetrator of it intends to cause persons to fear racial violence".

³⁸ See Bell P *Multicultural Australia in the Media* (Office of Prime Minister & Cabinet, Office of Multicultural Affairs AGPS Canberra, 1992)

³⁹ See, for example, the editorial "PC Fiction" in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 July 1995.

“Artists, novelists, historians and literary scholars cannot give a facile shrug of their shoulders and say, like Pilate, ‘what is truth?’.”⁴⁰

The tenacity with which defenders of the novel’s awards have argued that, as literature, it must not be subject to the assessment one would give to, for example, a work of scholarship, indicates the difficulties confronting educators who seek to promote tolerance in formal educative settings.⁴¹ Further, it raises profound questions as to the understanding by the “literary” judges as to the effect of their honouring the novel under discussion.⁴²

Blaming the Victim

The novelist not only defended her depictions of anti-Jewish characters, but made statements in “factual” articles which reinforced the legitimacy, in her eyes, of the comparison of Jews with Bolsheviks and adherence to this belief as the “cause” of some crimes against humanity.⁴³ Discussion of the novel led, inevitably, to an airing of views regarding the reason for the behaviour of those who participate in crimes against humanity. Without the question ever being posed directly, the cumulative effect of a number of contributions to the debate was to ask what the Jews had done to invoke such anger, hatred and murderous response to their presence. This is not the appropriate occasion to attempt to present an answer to the vexed question “Why the Jews?” However, it is notable that all respected scholarship on this subject sources the problem in the antisemite, with the actual behaviour of the victims of antisemitism never a determinant.⁴⁴

The public dispute, in Australia in 1995, over whether or not Jews were disproportionately attracted to Bolshevism, Menshivism, humanitarianism or any

⁴⁰ Myers D, “Faction is a minefield for novelists and historians”, *Courier Mail*, 23 August, 1995

⁴¹ See, for example, Birsks *op cit* and the speech by Isi Leibler, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, to the July 1995 meeting of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (Victor Kleerekoper, “Demidenko book ‘more dangerous than any revisionist history’”, *Australian Jewish News* (Melbourne), 7 July 1995).

⁴² Raymond Gaita, Professor of Philosophy in the Institute of Advanced Research, Australian Catholic University, wrote “for a community to honour a book is for that community to welcome that book and its author into its public space. That space is partly constituted by standards which are wider and of a more generally humane kind than are those which constitute the literary or academic community. A book may have high literary merit and at the same time shame a community that honours it. A book whose clear intent and achievement is wicked, could, nonetheless, rightly be studied in a university literature course because of its literary qualities. But what kind of community could seriously ask whether it should honour something whose clear intent and achievement is wicked?”, “Literature and honour”, *The Australian Jewish News* (Melbourne), 14 July 1995.

⁴³ Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz described this as “the ultimate ‘abuse excuse’ for genocide. The ‘Jewish communists’ abused us, the author suggests, so now you should understand why we abused them back”, Dershowitz A, “Holocaust ‘abuse excuse’ fails to disguise murder most foul” *The Australian Financial Review*, 29 June 1995.

⁴⁴ Miriam Cosic in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described Nazi antisemitism as “the scapegoating behaviour of the authoritarian personality par excellence”. Cosic M, “The evil within: blind revenge of the victims”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 1994.

other "ism", and whether their behaviour brought on their own demise, evokes memories of the inquiry conducted in Russia after a wave of pogroms occurred in 1881 and 1882 in "Little Russia" (the then official name of the Ukraine). The Russian government's aim was to discern "whether the pogroms were the local people's reaction against Jewish exploitation and whether Jews should perhaps be isolated from the rest of the country to put an end to their economic activities and, consequently, to pogroms".⁴⁵

Nikolai Leskov, a major Russian writer, addressed the catalogue of charges made against the Jews, in a submission to the inquiry. In a piece which remains compelling a century after its composition, Leskov demolishes charges that the Jews' behaviour was in any way deleterious to Christians. In fact, as Leskov wrote, "the results are quite the opposite".⁴⁶ Certainly, "the common people's judgments" were not kind to the Jewish population, but harsher assessments of Armenians and Greeks did not lead to pogroms against them. The claims of Jews corrupting morals were dismissed by comparing areas of Jewish settlement with areas where Jews were forbidden to settle. Jews also scored well on tests of patriotism, bravery, charity and altruism.

The charges to which Leskov responded were rationalisations for hateful persecution of defenceless "outsiders", as were previous charges of Deicide, ritual murder, witchcraft, plague-spreading and exploitation before them, and international conspiracy, Bolshevism, cosmopolitanism and other later charges.

Aharon Weiss comments

"Immediately after the German occupation of Western Ukraine, a wave of pogroms spread through the area. Twenty-four thousand Jews were killed in fifty-eight cities and towns and in many villages . . . The main reason for these pogroms and the further consistent hostile measures against the Jews was rooted in two sources: the traditional anti-Semitism among various layers of the Ukrainian population and the fostering of Nazi ideology by the Ukrainian extremists."⁴⁷

"Nazi ideology" in Europe appealed to a diverse cross-section of communities, including a number whose destiny under Nazism was servitude to the Master Race. Murderers and participants in the most heinous of crimes against civilian men, women and children came from a variety of educational and social backgrounds, sharing little beyond the ability to dehumanise the subjects of their barbarism.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Introduction to extracts from Nikolai Leskov, "The Jew in Russia: A few comments on the Jewish question", *Glas*, No 6, 1993, p 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* p 150.

⁴⁷ Weiss A, "Jewish-Ukrainian Relations in Western Ukraine During the Holocaust" in Potichnyj PJ and Aster H (eds) *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective*, (University of Toronto Press), 1988.

⁴⁸ Important studies of the human beings who participated in the Nazi Genocide include Browning C,

The focus on characteristics of the victim ignores the more important dynamic of racism and is a potentially counter-productive distraction. A debate in Australia on whether Jews were predisposed to Bolshevism, framed in a manner designed to divine what the Jews may have done to bring Genocide upon themselves, is both disturbing and dangerous.

Political Correctness

In each of the debates referred to above, accusations of "Political Correctness" were levelled by and against many participants. Rarely if ever defined, "Political Correctness" is used as a derogatory term to describe points of view with which one does not agree yet appear to have certain currency. Whether the book is or is not antisemitic, whether the prizes have been gained on merit or through tokenism, and whether dissent is in and of itself praiseworthy were debated under the cloud of fear of being dismissed as "Politically Correct", which must concern all Australians who seek to have moral, political and philosophical human rights' questions debated and determined on their merits.

Those who praised the novelist for her "bravery" in producing a work which entered a moral minefield from an unsavoury perspective were contrasted with critics who allegedly held a "Politically Correct" view of anti-anti-semitism⁴⁹ or engaged in "oh so politically and historically correct chatterings".⁵⁰

On the other hand, the way in which antisemitic comments made by the writer were played down by her supporters led one commentator to argue that the novel's "anti-Semitism was rationalised by various politically correct judges. . . on the basis of Ms D's claimed membership in Australia's multicultural ranks",⁵¹ another to ask if antisemitism was now considered "politically correct"⁵² and a third to submit that "Anti-semitism is merely the most traditional of the many forbidden feelings to which educated people rarely confess" and that the novelist had grasped this and taken advantage of "a wholly new form of political correctness" which permitted antisemitism to rear its head in Australian institutions.⁵³

When the book was granted the Miles Franklin Award, federal and state politicians applauded the judges' recognition of the multicultural nature of Australian so-

48—Continued

Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland, (Harper Perennial, New York, 1993).

49 See, for example, Devine F, "Agenda-setter brought to book", *The Australian*, 24 July 1995.

50 Hal Wootten QC used this term to dismiss the key articles which exposed the factual failings of the novelist's "faction", in a letter "We are all potential monsters", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 August 1995

51 Akerman P, "Literati blow their own cover", *Daily Telegraph-Mirror*, 23 August 1995

52 Henderson A, "A book with echoes of unholy views", *The Age*, 6 July 1995.

53 Field A, "The winds of change", *Courier Mail*, 30 August 1995

ciety,⁵⁴ which prompted certain critics of the novel to attribute the judges' decision to recognition of multiculturalism, but of a tokenistic, "Politically Correct", rather than praiseworthy, nature, with dailies in Melbourne and Adelaide making the question of the "political correctness" of the award the subject of editorials.⁵⁵

The Implications of the Debates

All the forgoing disputes provide evidence of the difficulties confronting Australians who seek to promote informed, intelligent debate on the moral questions which lie at the heart of human rights advocacy. Although a number of exemplary articles on the issues under discussion resulted from the numerous debates following the Miles Franklin Award, many Australians who occupy respected positions in public life will validly now have their judgement on human rights issues open to question.

⁵⁴ "According to Immigration Minister Senator Nick Bolkus, Ms Demidenko's win signifies the acceptance of the migrant experience in Australian literature", NSW Shadow Minister for Ethnic Affairs James Samios said "Australia is a nation of migrants and has taken in migrants whether they were convicts or refugees. So many of us seem to carry some kind of dead heart shame or guilt about the past generation's actions. Helen shows us how to integrate this", *The Australian Jewish News* (Melbourne), 9 June 1995.

⁵⁵ "Read between the lines", *Herald Sun*, 22 August 1995. "Fact, fiction and ethnic fury", *The Adelaide Advertiser*, 23 August 1995.

