

## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

I had planned my escape carefully before I was born. Whatever Life had in store for me, I would not be caught short, held prisoner by any history but the one that I would write. My story would be autobiographical and at the centre of that was one destiny: I would be a cartoonist.

My meeting with a yellow pencil came early. I was no more than four when I encountered it. Someone held it over a sheet of paper and as I watched it glide across the blank page, enraptured with my treasure, my destiny was sealed. I might have thrown a great tantrum. 'Give it to me! Give it to me!' was all I was trying to say: 'It is mine'. But such a dangerous object had to be withheld from one so young. I could put out one of my eyes. Or both. Before I learnt to speak, before words became the tools to articulate emotion, the pencil beckoned. It is my primal vision, my first memory.

And when finally it was put in my hand, my future began.

I was an artist before my father imposed his hopes and dreams on me: *Be a doctor, better yet, be a dentist. Find a suitable profession* – something respectable which would ensure vast sums of money. *You can always keep drawing as a hobby*, I was always told.

I surprised everyone, especially my mother who thought she'd hit menopause rather than a third pregnancy, when I snuck out on the 21st of January 1940 in Johannesburg, South Africa to immigrant parents who had escaped Lithuania in the

early 1920's. While we were safe in exile, a world away from Hitler's Europe, my mother's family was trapped there.

Even as the madness of Nazism loomed on one continent, simultaneously, across the seas, in America, a new form of art was emerging. I was born under both the shadow of the Shoah and in the glow of the golden age of the comic. Though my parents possessed poetic, philosophical and humorist temperaments (my mother's nickname was *Der Wietsling*, the Wit), there is no trace of a cartoonist in our family tree. I was the first to use a pencil for the purposes of sketching. Drawing wasn't very... Jewish.

Unlike suffering.

While the events of history's darkest hours weighed heavy on my besieged parents, I filled my childhood with copied drawings from the comic masters. Mine was the fantasy world of superheroes and Walt Disney. I was two years older than Superman and decades younger than The Katzenjammer Kids, Popeye and Mickey Mouse.

I followed that yellow pencil into a world of the artist's imagination long before Big Bad History got a hold of me. Even before I learnt to cry for my mommy after her first heart attack when I was eight years old, my fate was already inscribed in stone, defining what I would become, no matter my intergenerational inheritance. The yellow pencil was my signpost.

But horrors infiltrated this cocoon of happiness. I heard whispers about concentration camps, gas chambers, mass graves, massacres and family members turned to ash. My mother's only sister, husband and small boy child were consumed

in that inferno and forever after, my mother carried that loss, which in turn, took her from us just after my thirteenth birthday.

Three years later my father married my old Hebrew teacher - a survivor of Dachau who had lost both her husband and young son in that hell. As her pupil at cheder I learnt to accept her harsh disciplines. Like all the other kids, I was afraid of her. We could not wait for the year to end. And then my father made her my stepmother. She was a woman enshrouded in darkness with a story to break any heart. She did not speak about her past or engage in casual conversation, was a chain smoker and wore a permanent scowl. She brought the Holocaust into our home. It was impossible to escape its torments.

As her stepson, my Life lessons began in earnest.

She expected me and my brother Mot to follow every mitzvah to the letter – my father had promised her his sons' full obedience. If not, we would be doomed for all time. Each day she witnessed our disregard for her standards, so too, we diminished in her eyes. I am certain she never forgave my father for making promises he couldn't make good, especially to a Holocaust survivor. But Mot and I were hewn from the same hard-headed rock as my dad and we would be anything but converts. Our Judaism would forever be a party of the soul.

Looking back now, as an old man who does not expect to live much longer, I see her as a broken woman grasping at God, for the sake of whatever remained of her mutilated sanity. Perhaps our flagrant disregard for the Torah's commandments made all she'd lost seem even more meaningless. But honestly, I have no idea.

Like all lives, mine has not always been tip top. I've had my share of fraught. Happy and unhappy have dogged my years but only to my greater benefit. In recent years, I have fallen into ill health only to rise again. Senile dementia has pillaged my short-term memory. But I did not live through those gates of purgatory. I do not have a number tattooed on my arm.

Does this disqualify me to write a story about the camps? It's a question I have wrestled with over many decades.

As a Jew, there is no escaping Holocaust. It is our constant ghost. It dogs our heels. It has haunted my entire career. It rendered me motherless and step-mothered too young.

So it was inevitable that on the road to my Oz I would encounter the scarecrow figure of Gagman.

We all know it takes a village to raise a child. But it takes war, bereavement, a close encounter with one's own death to grow a seasoned adult.

Decades after I first learned how to draw by wallowing in the different styles of the various artists I copied assiduously, I began to look for their names. I had got to know Superman intimately but had never heard of Shuster and Siegel, their creators, who have defined the medium forever. The truth is, that the repertoire of human comedy is small. Soup will always have a fly in it, and someone alone on a desert island will always have something disparaging to say about a mother-in-law. All I do is rework the clichés.

The greatest sin is indifference.

The cartoonist Jules Feiffer once wrote that Superman's real home wasn't Krypton but 'the planet Poland, from Lodz maybe, possibly Crakow, maybe Vilna.'

The American Jewish influences on comic-book culture are now widely celebrated, thanks in part to Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, but Superman, more than most, seems colored by the immigrant experience. Shuster's mother had left Russia after pogroms, and Superman (whose Krypton name, Kal-El, is very close to the Hebrew for 'Voice of God') survives the near-total destruction of his people to resettle in America, becoming, as Feiffer put it, the 'striving Jewish boy's goyishe American dream.' In his first adventures, he saves a man from being lynched and beats up a wife beater. Before America entered the war, he deposited Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito at the World Court. In response, the official newspaper of the S.S. dismissed the comic as the work of an 'inventive Israelite.'

I have tried to turn Gagman into a graphic novel but have failed miserably. I wanted him to take his place somewhere between Superman, Batman and the Watchmen. I know what it is to be chased everyday by a deadline. I was a political cartoonist for fifty years. At times it seemed like my life depended on it. My graphic novel was supposed to be that blend of pictures and words, 'commix' as Art Spiegelman has named the medium. But the words had dominion over the graphics and what I have is a hybrid. I have pursued the phantom of the Holocaust for over seventy years and forget who is chasing whom. I carry the burden of Holocaust and humour has not lightened the load.

This project went on so long that I lost sight of it until my daughter Joanne, an internationally bestselling author and her dear friend and architect of the Holocaust museum in Johannesburg, Lewis Levin helped resurrect it. In truth, it was Lewis who

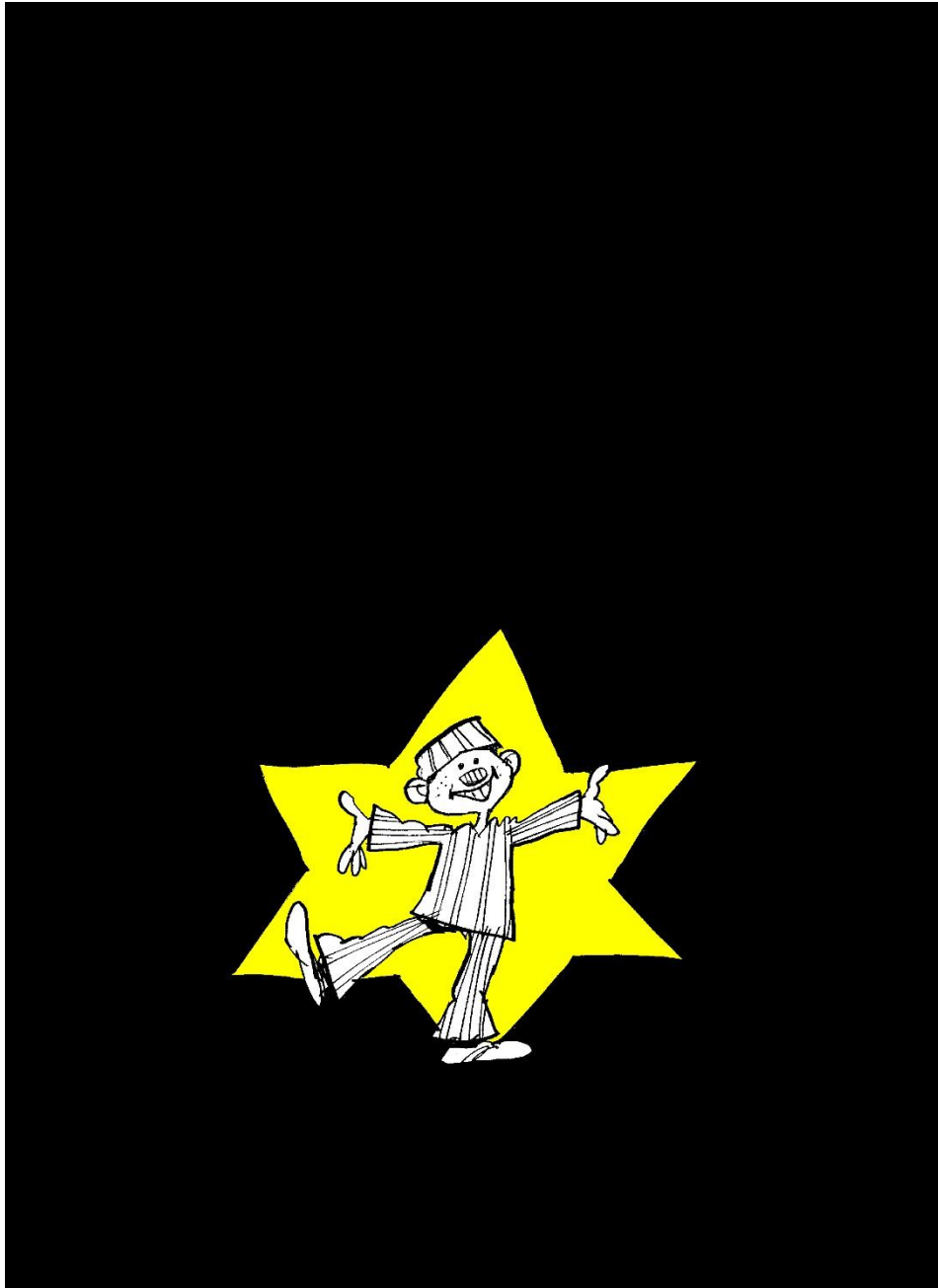
saw the value of this project and insisted on its revival. For his vision, enthusiasm and commitment to Gagman, I am eternally grateful.

I have avoided drawing the world of the gas chambers, the ovens and those who lived and survived it all. I have focused on the mind of my comedic camp victim. A comic-book cannot do the story justice. The words have to appeal to the voice in one's head, like a radio show which is the 'theater of the mind.' But the pictures I have drawn create a complimentary narrative, which I hope enrich and expand the experience for you, the way a commentary interacts with a text.

Like the smoke that lingers from the crematoria, the gas that leaks through history from those cold chambers, and the laughter that cuts through all suffering and reminds us we are human, Gagman always lurks in my shadows.

I am forever, The Yellow Star Kid.

DOV FEDLER, Johannesburg, April 2021



*'Of all that is written, I love only what a person hath written with his blood. Write with blood, and thou wilt find that blood is spirit.'*

– Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra