

# Books in the News

## 'Letters to Yitz' Portrays 2 Brothers

"Letters to Yitz," edited by Eliezer D. Jaffe; Herzl Press, distributed by World Zionist Organization; 83 pp; \$5.00, 1981

BY JUDITH OSTER

Of course *Letters to Yitz* (edited by Eliezer D. Jaffe) will interest friends of the Jaffe family based in Cleveland--especially the friends of Eliezer Jaffe or the late Arthur Jaffe (Yitz).

Art's wasteful and tragic death in 1979 at the hands of an armed robber brought grief to his family and many, many friends, and shock to the entire community. One must distance oneself from remembrance of Art and his tragic death, distance oneself from acquaintance with the many "characters" in this story, and ask whether this book has interest and value for a reader who has never heard of the Jaffe family or Cleveland's Orthodox communal institutions.

The answer is an unhesitating YES, because of the subjects Yitz and Eli write about, and the feelings they bring to them.

With the spontaneity and ease that comes of writing with no eye to publication, experiences and opinions are aired vividly and honestly. Dr. Eliezer Jaffe of the School of Social Work of the Hebrew University has much to say about social problems in Israel. He writes of his worries about Ashkenazi-Sephardi polarity and of his concern that 90% of Ashkenazi social work students are working with a clientele that is 90% Sephardi. Concerned as well with zero population growth, especially in the face of the Moslem reproduction rate, he writes of the Zahavi movement to help large Jewish families:

Most people think Zionist visionaries are dead, but modern pioneering is not swamp reclamation, and it's not living on a kibbutz, or even settling the Jordan Valley or the Shomron frontiers. I believe today's pioneering involves the struggle for the soul of Israel, for the cultural survival of the different ethnic groups that have come here.

Social problems and bureaucracy, those great enemies of Israel in Israel, can and must be fought, Eli implies.

Israel is not sentimentalized; simply it is *ours*, and of supreme importance--so that one must come there to settle, or at least to send one's children on ahead if one cannot yet leave entangling obligations behind.

The price of aliyah, though, is often separation. It means two brothers whose children do not grow up together; it means "long planned and quick-ending visits." But in this case, it also means bonds that can strengthen even during separation, maybe even because of it. Of his special closeness to Yitz, Eliezer writes: "the interesting thing is that our closeness developed while we were separated geographically."

These comments--the whole book, in fact--remind us what letters can be for the writer and the reader--not only a communication, but a literary art which is being lost amid long-distance calls and tape recorders.

Eliezer speaks of the "medicine" of writing; Arthur, of sitting alone in a

dangerous neighborhood, waiting for the truck to arrive, and writing to his brother.

Alone with paper, and yet not alone, because each knows the letter will be read with great interest, written and read with a need to keep bonds firm and a relationship alive.

There is humor, and an occasional flash of anger. Always in these letters is the sense of sharing what is important to the writer, the sense of an immediate audience.

In this way, even the letters written by Eli are a tribute to Yitz; but in another, a fundamental way, one feels Yitz's influence on Eli. The first letter of the book is from 21-year-old Yitz to his 14-year-old brother Eli, a passionate explanation of why he had to hurt his parents and go on Hachsharah (then in New Jersey) to prepare to go to Palestine.

Even though Arthur never did reach that anticipated day when he would make aliyah, early on he seems to have set the tone for Eli's later letters, just as placing that letter at the beginning sets the tone for the book.

From Yitz we are given Jewish communal concerns, but mainly we are given the family, a Jewish family--grief over a father's death, concern for an aging mother, pride in children, nieces and nephews. And we are given familiar "Jewish values;" 'hachnoset orchim' (Befriending guests) is not a gimmick to get Jews to share their wealth, but an ingenious way of getting Jews involved with each other and protective of each other."

Dr. Jaffe shows admirable tact and restraint in his "documents only" presentation of Arthur's death. There is no narrative, no comment: a hasty trans-Atlantic phone conversation

--verbatim, a newspaper article--reproduced, a tribute by Rabbi Louis Engelberg--also reproduced.

No more is needed. The facts cry out sufficiently for themselves; the facts are horror enough. Seven months later, in a last "letter," Eli writes something of his feelings and his thoughts, and this too must be left to speak for itself.

One finds that the book has its ironies: Yitz's letter about aliyah to his brother who made aliyah while he did not; Eli's concern with social problems as the greatest enemy, and Arthur's death at the hands of a "social problem;" Arthur's concern for the safety of his Israeli family through wars and terrorism, and his own death in Cleveland in peacetime.

Israel in war and peace, aliyah, Jewish values, Jewish communal concerns in America and Israel--the book is about all of these, but most of all the reader is privileged to share with the writers of the letters what it can mean to have a brother.