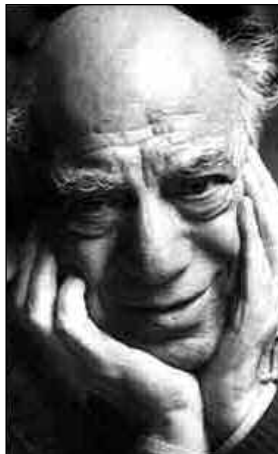


By Bennett Muraskin

*In this series we are featuring profiles of leading secular and humanistic Jews from various countries and eras. These profiles are written by Bennett Muraskin, a regular contributor to Outlook, Humanistic Judaism and Jewish Currents. Many of these profiles appear in Bennett's book Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Progressive Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Centre for Cultural Judaism. (For ordering information contact CSJO at [csjo@csjo.org](mailto:csjo@csjo.org).)*

## Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004)



Born in Paris, Maxime Rodinson was the son of Russian and Polish Jews who immigrated to France around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His parents were working class and became loyal and enthusiastic members of the French Communist Party. In 1927, as a boy, Maxime joined them at a demonstration protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Italian-American anarchists. Rodinson joined the Party himself in 1937, at the height of Stalin's purges. He did not quit until 1958, two years after Khrushchev's epochal speech denouncing Stalin, and the Hungarian revolt against Soviet domination. For the rest of his life, Rodinson considered himself an independent Marxist.

Rodinson struggled to survive economically as a youth. At age 17, he passed competitive exams to gain admittance to a School for Oriental Languages, where he became fluent in Arabic. In 1937, he began to study the history of Islam. Rodinson survived World War Two in Syria and Lebanon, where he worked for the French Institute and taught at a Muslim high school. However, his parents were captured by the pro-Nazi Vichy authorities during World War Two and murdered in Auschwitz.

In 1947, Rodinson returned to France and worked as a librarian at the National Library, in charge of the Arabic section. In time, he received a university appointment at the Sorbonne as Professor of Middle Eastern Ethnology and became an outstanding scholar of the Arab world and Islam. His scholarly output includes a biography of Mohammed (1961), *Islam and Capitalism* (1966),

*Marxism and the Muslim World* (1972), *The Arabs* (1979) and *The Fascination of Islam* (1980). In these studies, he sought to

analyse Islam in sociological terms. They were once used in Arab universities, but due to pressure from Islamic clerics, they have been largely banned. In 1979, Rodinson instantly discerned and denounced the reactionary nature of the Iranian Islamic revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power.

When the Six-Day War broke out in June 1967, the European left was firmly in Israel's camp, including France's leading left-wing intellectual Jean-Paul

Sartre. The French government as well had been the principal foreign supporter of Israel since 1956. Rodinson was among the first to break with this consensus, arguing in a long magazine article published in Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* for the recognition of Palestinian national rights. (Isaac Deutscher, a Trotskyist then living in England, was another.) I.F. Stone, the brilliant American journalist previously known for his Zionist sympathies, brought Rodinson's article to the attention of the American press in a review article that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* in August 1967 in which he substantially endorsed Rodinson's views.

In 1968, Rodinson's article was published in book form. In 1973, it appeared in English as *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* It was a question Rodinson answered in the affirmative. Drawing on historic precedents, he saw Zionism as a colonial movement of white European settlers that dispossessed the native non-white population, similar to the European colonization of the New World, Australia or South Africa. His views on Judaism and its relationship to anti-Semitism and Zionism were expressed in *Cult, Ghetto and State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question*, a collection of essays that appeared in English translation in 1984.

Zionists could not fathom how a child of Holocaust victims could reject the necessity of a Jewish state in Israel and attacked Rodinson as a self-hating Jew. "I would be the last to minimize the atrocity of Auschwitz," he responded, "but don't the tears of the others count? Must I turn a blind

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## RODINSON..

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eye to the tears caused by those who call themselves—and are to some degree—my congeners, even if they too are survivors of Auschwitz? I am not saying that it has attained the dimensions of Auschwitz, but many Jews have made many tears flow in the land of Palestine.” Israel, he conceded, was built on hard work and suffering. It endowed Jews worldwide with greater self-respect and provided a refuge to the persecuted. Yet it also encouraged Jews to adopt an ethnocentric view of the world that eroded humanistic ideals. And it created an intractable conflict with the Arab world that inevitably leads to endless cycles of violence. On balance, Zionism and Israel were, in Rodinson’s opinion, harmful to both Jewish and Arab interests. “Any universalist critique of nationalism in general,” he wrote, “also targets Zionism, for in it we find all the unpleasant features of nationalism, beginning with contempt for the rights of others...”

Rodinson also criticized certain Arab attitudes toward Israel as reactionary and self-defeating. He supported the Palestinian cause, while at the same time urging the PLO to eschew anti-Jewish rhetoric derived from both European anti-Semitic ideology and Islamic teachings. In speaking before Arab audiences he warned that Israeli Jews were not “a heterogeneous collection of gangs of occupiers who could be sent back where they came...” Israel Jews were there to stay, and Rodinson’s solution was a bi-national one. “If there are two or more ethnic groups in the same country and

if the danger of the domination of one by the other is to be avoided, then both these groups must be represented as distinct communities at the political level and each must be accorded the right to defend its interests and aspirations.” Israel, as the stronger power and the one that imposed its will on the weaker, had the primary obligation to make amends for the injustices it inflicted on the Palestinians. But the Palestinians must also recognize the national rights of Israeli Jews.

As a child, Rodinson received no Jewish education, but he studied Jewish history on his own as an adult. His experience as a Jew in France convinced him that assimilation into the broader culture was natural and desirable and was only forestalled by anti-Semitism on one hand or Zionism on the other. Anti-Semitism and Zionism shared basic premises, he argued. Both ideologies claimed that Jewish identity is immutable; that Jews were intrinsically different from non-Jews; that they would always be hated and persecuted; and that

they should get out of Europe. Rodinson believed that Jewish identity only survives as a result of the coercive pressures generated by these two forces.

It is true, as Rodinson asserts, that Jews outside Israel hardly fit the definition of a nation, divided as we are by language, origin, and disparate degrees of religiosity. In many cases, we probably have more in common with our non-Jewish fellow citizens than with fellow Jews living in other countries. However, lacking a real connection with Jewish culture (he consistently described Yiddish as “a German dialect”), Rodinson underestimated the authentic appeal of Judaism—in its religious and secular varieties—to Jews who are linked to their past. By insisting that Jews have no positive reasons to remain Jewish, Rodinson demonstrated that he never completely shed the dogmatic Marxism he had adopted as a Communist.

Rodinson wrote a memoir of his youth, *Souvenirs d’un Marginal* (2005) which has yet to be translated into English. ♦

## BIG NIGHT..

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distant relative whom he never knew, and although he was still a *nebbish*, at least he could now “provide.” Mama, who would still continue to work tirelessly, take in sewing, and worry about everyone and everything, was finally (but, I suspected, only temporarily) happy.

Then, mercy be, the play was over! Amid clamorous applause, the lights would come on, revealing a sea of happy but tear-stained faces. An aura of hope and good feeling would permeate

the atmosphere. After all, if such good luck could happen to the characters on stage, who was to say that similar happy fortune would not be forthcoming to the members of the audience? They all had problems, and a little hope went a long way.

A good time had been had by all, except me. I knew it wasn’t the last time my Mother would make me go with her and Grandma to the Yiddish theater, and of course, it wasn’t. I didn’t realize that, seventy years later, my grandma’s big night out would become one of my favourite memories. ♦