

Fanning the Flames

by **Shira Sebban**

“How are you, Saba?”

“I? I am old.”

This question and answer routine would be repeated each morning like a familiar ritual when we would ring to check on the “Old Boy” as he was affectionately known, who still lived alone in a flat nearby.

I assume he appreciated our concern, although he never said so. Still we need not have worried ... not then. Relishing the solitude that enabled him to read, think and write—so long as it was interspersed with alternate dinners at his son’s and daughter’s homes each evening—he was keen to preserve his autonomy for as long as possible.

Until well into his eighties, Saba (Hebrew for grandfather) would continue his exercise and diet regime, doing daily sit-ups and stretches, taking afternoon naps, munching on carrot and celery sticks, and preserving prunes in jars, which took up almost all-available bench space in his kitchen, be it at home in Melbourne, Australia, or wherever he was living overseas. I can still recall our family kitchen in London, filled to overflowing with my grandfather’s preserves, his snores emanating from the tiny bedroom next to the one I shared with my sister.

Not to say, however, that he lacked a sweet tooth. He could whip up a mean trifle and revelled in long smorgasbord lunches at fancy hotels, where he would indulge in chocolate éclairs and other treats, acknowledging his

diabetes by popping a sweetener into the habitual tea with lemon he drank after every meal.

Lemons were so important to him that when he was asked to look after us as teenagers while our parents were overseas, he would dutifully arrive each evening for dinner and promptly disappear outside to water the lemon tree, which he believed would prevent the fruit's skin from thickening. In the morning, he would depart for the peace and quiet of his apartment again, where he could spend the day in undisturbed contemplation.

Classical music was his constant companion, be it tapes he had made himself or the local classical music public radio station, with which he had a love-hate relationship, railing against the “moaning and groaning of illiterate so-called contemporary composers.” In one letter to the station, he urged such composers to test their claim to have popular support within the open market rather than “bludge on the public purse and coerce the people to listen to their incompetent noise-making.”

He was also partial to international melodramas, often joining the family in front of the television after dinner, when he would walk around jangling keys and loose change in his pockets during particularly tense moments. Keen to avoid confrontation whenever possible, he would burst into song—usually the old Russian folk tune *Ochi chyomye* (“Dark Eyes”)—whenever a family disagreement arose, which did not involve him.

Every so often, craving intellectual companionship, Saba would pack a bag, sling it over his shoulder, and head off overseas to Europe, his old home in Israel, or the United States, where cousins, who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust, were scattered. He would visit each in turn, and they would host family dinners in his honor and write him letters in English, Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish when he was back in Melbourne, sharing how they had delighted in his company.

During these trips, which could last several months or sometimes even years, he would commune with philosophers and historians at academic institutions in London, Boston, or Tel Aviv or on long walks through the Austrian Alps, even though he himself had not had a formal secular education and, to the envy of his grandchildren, had never even sat an exam.

He strove to cultivate a personal relationship with us from a young age too, asking for letters from each of his six grandchildren while he was overseas. If we were remiss in writing, he would remind our parents that we owed him a letter, and he liked nothing better than to respond to our questions, the more philosophical the better. I revelled in his attention—especially on the rare occasions when I was fortunate enough to join him on his travels—and placed him on a pedestal: my wise Saba could do no wrong.

Blessed with an inquiring and incisive mind, an insatiable desire for knowledge, and a photographic memory, he would peruse erudite tomes on a wealth of subjects in second-hand bookstores, sending crates of books back home, where he would autograph and catalogue them as part of his own library or distribute them as gifts to family and friends. As he explained in a letter to his daughter, “I will at least leave an inheritance, not in diamonds and jade, but in books, which were costly to me not only in money but in time and effort.”

I treasure that inheritance today, my study’s shelves arrayed with books my Saba gave me. The one I value most is his personal copy of *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, an encyclopaedia of Jewish learning from the 1960s, which he presented to my husband and me during his last visit to our home, scraps of paper still marking the pages most important to him.

When bestowing a book as a gift, he would always include an inscription, ranging from a birthday wish or expression of love to an elaborate desire for social cohesion. The dedication on our last gift reads: “Wishing you success and a humane understanding of the kindness and social variety of others.

Best wishes from an old octogenarian. Saba.” For he strongly believed that everyday human relations should be conducted with empathy, truth, and love.

During his travels, he would occasionally purchase a work of art for himself or as a gift. He thought that while art appreciation is subject to individual taste and values, “striving to enjoy art in all its forms” helps “a civilized person to cultivate a taste for aesthetics and so foster an understanding of beauty.”

As he wrote to my parents after buying them an antique Tibetan Buddha in Spain, “Art objects should serve as a means to inspire the most lofty thoughts. But should a collection serve only as an accumulation of wealth or to show off, to my mind it is wrong.”

The patriarch of the family, Saba would preside over gatherings, regaling the table with such passions as the problems of justice and of individual freedom within the rule of law. I recall many festive dinners where the extended family would gather around the long dining room table with my grandfather at the head expounding his views. No two dinners were alike, as he could be relied upon to present his arguments from multiple angles.



Berl Gross ("Saba")

Fundamentally, he believed we all face a personal choice between leading an autonomous life of rationality, integrity, and dignity in the human world of ideas or a life of emotion, imitation, and subservience in what he termed “the domesticated animal kingdom.” As he wrote to a friend, “Does a man act out of rational argument or is man an animal whose elected shepherds know best what is good for him?”

Alternatively, he might have been keen to discuss what he had read that particular day which, given his eclectic interests, could range from a biography of Galileo Galilei, or the writings of Bertrand Russell, to biblical commentaries on Abraham, Moses, or Samuel, various newspaper articles, which he would mark for others to read, or even an account of the Shakers, a utopian Christian sect, some of whose former American settlements he visited and whose virtual demise fascinated him. Even while on an otherwise disappointing holiday in Tahiti, he derived enjoyment from reading daily doses from a volume of Albert Einstein's essays, which he had happened to pick up at the Sydney airport.

Anyone brave enough to attempt an answer to what Saba meant as a rhetorical question would usually be met with a resounding "no" or, far less frequently, an "oh" in agreement (both words pronounced with a short 'o' sound) and a lengthy, passionate exposition of his views. Yet he did not lack for sparring partners.

"How do you know that you know?" "What do you mean by God?" Influenced by the late eminent philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper, whose seminars Saba attended at the London School of Economics in the 1960s and who later became a life-long friend, Saba emphasized the importance of having a skeptical outlook on life and of continuously questioning one's premises.

In contrast to his own childhood experience within an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Poland, he argued that parents do not have the right to impose religious beliefs on their children, as such convictions are open to doubt and "It is up to parents to guide the young ones with unquestionable honesty." At the same time, he believed that an agnostic is still free to maintain traditions as an expression of cultural and communal adherence. He continued to attend synagogue fairly regularly into old age, always ensuring he had a book to read discretely during the rabbi's sermons.

He vigorously opposed the use of force in disciplining children, arguing that physical punishment may "influence the child to look at the world as a society

where reason is not a way of life, only force is the language of grownups. The child does not accept the beating as a consequence of being wrong, but rather reflects that grownups beat children because children are weak and cannot fend for themselves.” He was speaking from personal experience, his own father having used force against him. I never recall Saba raising a hand against anyone. For him, the power of persuasion depended on one’s choice of words.

Self-deprecating and able to converse with young and old alike, he cultivated a multitude of friends around the world. Academics and thinkers enjoyed the free exchange of ideas in his company, while students wrote him letters of appreciation for helping to clarify their thinking or correct their theses. People generously opened their homes to him and upon his departure, would write, requesting another visit. He maintained a rich correspondence with many who broadly admired his values and ideas, as well as the freedom of his chosen lifestyle, which he described as that of “a man divorced of daily responsibilities.”

Nevertheless, Saba always considered himself an outsider, and although his vocabulary was highly sophisticated, he was particularly unsure of his written English expression, writing drafts of important letters and texts, which were often corrected by his daughter.

He advised those around him to do our best to enrich our lives with, what he termed, “mental-spiritual interests.” As he wrote to my teenage sister and me: “Very soon, your holidays start and you have a swimming pool, books, a piano, cello and violin, what a rich life in front of you!” Whenever his children or grandchildren would ask his advice on our future studies, he would steer us in the direction of a great body of thought such as Science or Philosophy and encourage us to be creative and aim for excellence. He set an example by striving to learn mathematics at the University of Illinois in his fifties.

Yet, he remained highly critical of academia, which he considered to have largely degenerated into “coercive systems of education,” staffed by

incompetent “charlatans” who felt immune from scrutiny. Careers were not as important to him as the sheer love of learning, although he certainly emphasized the need to work, which he averred to have learned from his father. In later life, he would often tell stories of his father—the last Jew to have a full religious burial in the central Polish town of Zdunska Wola—acknowledging that he had instilled in his children a love of Jewish learning, as well as an appreciation for the importance of being responsible for oneself and one’s actions. As Saba explained, “self-reliance and self-respect are important for self-fulfilment, which is the difference between man as a person and man as a domesticated animal.”

My grandfather always remained true to his principles—until, as he put it, he lost his “I”, Alzheimer’s disease ultimately robbing him of whom he was as a person. In my mind’s eye, I can still see him sitting in the middle of his room, endlessly twisting a Rubik’s Cube around in his hands. Up to that time, however, he lived as if he was on an insatiable intellectual quest. As he wrote to me, “Life is full of exciting curiosities, joy, and deep feeling for the world’s mysteries.” Integrity, autonomy, and family were among the values he held dear and are now those I strive to instil in my children.

Saba was my mentor and anchor, who showed me that I could do anything to which I set my mind. He encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in and not be afraid to admit I had made a mistake, learn from it, and move on. My children may not have the privilege of growing up in his company, but they can still benefit from the rich and courageous legacy he left behind.



Shira Sebban is a writer and editor based in Sydney, Australia, who is passionate about exploring the challenges life throws at us through her writing. A former journalist, Shira previously taught French at the University of Queensland and worked in publishing. She has served on the board of her children's school for the past 12 years, including two terms as vice-president. Her work has appeared in online and print publications, including *Eureka Street*, *Jewish Literary Journal*, *The Forward*, *Australian Jewish News*, *Alzheimer's Reading Room*, and *Online Opinion*. She is currently working on a series of creative nonfiction stories based on her mother's diary, which the family only discovered after her death. You can read more of her work at: shirasebban.wordpress.com.