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## **Scheherazade Restaurant Coffee Lounge 99 Acland Street, St Kilda**



In 1934, Monarch Quality Cakes opened business at 103 Acland Street, next door to O'Shea's milk bar. They were neighbours for 24 years. Acland Street offers the best eastern European cakes in Melbourne, impossibly rich and sweet. At no 81 is the Europa Cake Shop with its luscious window displays, no 93 is Bon Cake Shop and at 95 is the Acland Street Cake Shop. Arguably, Monarch Quality Cakes is the oldest surviving retail business in St Kilda.



Scheherazade Restaurant, 2004

In 1958, Avram and Masha Zeleznikov acquired O'Shea's and renamed it Scheherazade, a café serving comforting eastern European Jewish fare from family recipes. A haven, where for the price of a coffee, it is not forbidden to sit for hours. Particularly on Sunday mornings, it was the gathering place of single men living in St Kilda boarding houses or one-bedroom flats, who had lost entire families in the Holocaust and who came to Melbourne as refugees. Yiddish, Polish, Russian and English are spoken. Chicken broth, cabbage rolls, cholent, vegetable stew, chicken schnitzel, latkas, Black Forest cake, almond torte, apple compote, lemon tea and coffee are served. You can still see the occasional émigré, maybe from this earlier time, sitting alone or with their children, amongst the latté drinkers

For these men, amongst others, Scheherazade has

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offered a stable anchor to support their damaged lives; a certain source of gossip, community information, banter and sustenance for spirit as well as body. The unchanging wallpaper, the secluded back room and the round table in the window survive as intact as the furniture in any grandparents' front room.

The best café and bar proprietors instinctively understand how to offer such an essential service in a civil society. As a haven for refugees from terror and dire oppression, Melbourne has grown and been culturally enriched immeasurably.

Arnold Zable, the masterly Melbourne story telling novelist, has woven a tapestry of deceptively powerful stories, fictionalising the horror and hope of those of the Zeleznikovs and their customers, in his novel *Cafe Scheherazade*, part of which is paraphrased in what follows.

Avram, Masha, and their families have been involved in the revolutionary action and the profound suffering of political oppression in Eastern Europe for the entire first half of the twentieth century. Avram is the son of Etta Stock and Yankel Zeleznikov, both committed and professional socialist revolutionaries, members of the secret Berdichev Bund Labour Movement, with many Eastern European Jewish members.

Etta was born in Tul'chin, (between Kiev and Odessa), Ukraine in 1881. That year, Czar Alexander II was assassinated, anti-Semitic mobs rampaged, and refugees fled in tens of thousands. In 1900, she studied nursing in Odessa, on the north shore of the Black Sea, joined a Socialist cell and worked in a revolutionary printing works alongside the young Josef Stalin. In the year of revolution and bloodshed 1905, Nurse Stock was called to the famous battleship Potemkin to tend wounded crew.

Yenkel joined the Bund in Pinsk, Belarus near the Ukrainian border. She asked the Bund to support her revolutionary effort in Tul'chin. The Bund sent Yenkel, already a cadre at 18. By 1910 they had married. Both were arrested. Etta was released, but Yankel was exiled near Irkutsk, on Lake Baikal in Siberia.

In 1917, the Czar was assassinated. Etta Yankel continued their revolutionary activism in Kiev, the Ukraine capital. The Red Army moved to ban the Bund in 1922. Etta and Yankel fled, to Vilnius in Lithuania, over the border from Minsk, with its high Jewish population and rich culture; despite the terrible persecution of Jewish people in Lithuania in World War I. Here Avram was born in 1924, at Benedictinski 4, in the old city. But the Secret Police discovered Yenkel and sent him to labour camps in Siberia. He was never seen again. Etta also disappeared.

In 1939, Masha Frydman aged 12, was forced to escape from the invading Germans in Sosnowiec, just west of Poland, to Siedlice, east of Warsaw. Her parents were also Bundists. But German soldiers spared them and they were able to return, only to escape again over the frozen River Bug to Lutsk in the Ukraine, then to fall into the hands of Soviet police and forced eviction in cattle trucks to Siberia.

By 1941, the Nazis overcame the Red Army. Many Jewish men were shot in the forest near Pomary village. Avram survived. Russia was at war with Germany and the Polish people were allies of Russia. Released, they settled in the tiny village of Marke, Kazakhstan, until 1944, when the Soviet police forced the family to escape again, this time west to Dzhambul, Kazakhstan, just north-east of Tashkent.

The Frydman family returned home to Poland in 1945. The next year, Avram, now alone after the loss of his family, first met them at a Bund gathering near Wroclaw in Southern Poland. Avram worked for the Bund in Łódź, to the north-east of Wroclaw, where Masha had moved, to study medicine. In the Erich Maria Remarque (author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*) novel *Arc de Triomphe*, Avram and his friends first read about stateless people and a nightclub in Paris called Scheherazade, where émigrés could meet.

In 1941, the Nazis overcame the Red Army. Many Jewish men were shot in the forest near Pomary village. Avram hid. Other Jewish people were herded into ghettos and forced into slave labour, or later murdered, and Vilnius' richly historic Jewish quarter, destroyed. Avram escaped.

In 1943, the Vilnius ghetto was liquidated. Avram briefly found his mother, then after brave and audacious action to save her, she was finally taken. Avram and the partisans hid in dugouts in the Rudnicki swamp. In 1944 the group joined the Red Army to pursue the retreating enemy, through Vilnius. Avram enlisted as an intelligence officer. In 1945, again he was forced to escape into Poland and to Łódź. Sent by the Bund to investigate a police pogrom of Jewish people in Kielce, between Warsaw and Cracow, in 1946 he realised that once in power, the Bolsheviks would suppress the Bund.

Both Avram and the Frydmans were at dire risk. Most idealistically they agreed to leave separately and to meet together in Paris, at Scheherazade. And so, (eventually, circuitously, in Spring 1949) they did. Somehow, they made their way to Melbourne. It could be said that there have always been European Jewish people in St Kilda. Moritz Michaelis arrived in Melbourne from Hanover in 1853, not as a refugee, but as a free settler. He came to St Kilda in the 1860s (8).

Scheherazade comes from *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* a 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian text, first translated from Arabic into French 300 years ago. Sir Richard Burton's famous unexpurgated version (1885-88) runs to 16 volumes. In it, Sultan Shahriah had resolved to assuage the infidelity of his sultana by taking a fresh wife each night, only to strangle each at daybreak. Scheherazade, the daughter of the grand Vizier, staved off her execution by spinning him stories for 1,001 nights. So amused was the sultan that he revoked his cruel decree, calling her the 'liberator of women'. Her tales still entrance readers.

In 1888, Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov composed a symphonic suite based on the story and in 1910; Diaghilev's Ballet Russe performed a ballet to the music. Maurice Ravel also

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composed an overture in 1898 and a song cycle in 1903 all based on the story of the legendary sultanate.

The third Scheherazade, in St Kilda, is a place with the qualities of its two predecessors: safe refuge, openness to all émigrés and an endless repository of amazing stories.

## References

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