



Lenni Brenner: equality now or endless war.

Mrs Brenner's boy

Controversial anti-Zionist, American Jewish historian and a man with some weird sense of humour, Lenni Brenner has a new book out. JULIA PASCAL spoke to him.

City Limits: *Tell me about your background.*

Lenni Brenner: I was born in the great Jewish ghetto of Williamsburg in 1937, I was orthodox until I was seven when my parents gave it up.

CL: *Why?*

LB: During the war the price of meat was as high as a cat's back and kosher meat was even higher.

CL: *Were you brought up as a Jew?*

LB: Well I remember my mother always telling me 'whatever you do marry a Jewish girl'

CL: *And did you?*

LB: No, my first wife was black and the second a WASP. As a matter of fact my present girlfriend is Jewish but when I get into bed with a girl I don't say 'Excuse me, what religion are you?'

CL: *Tell me more about your childhood.*

LB: I was brought up in the Bronx which was one third Jewish, one third Italian and one third Irish. I never met a Protestant till I was my twenties.

CL: *Were your parents immigrants?*

LB: My mother was from Kiev and my grandfather was in the Austro-Hungarian army.

CL: *In your book you talk of how Jabotinsky spoke Yiddish but pretended not to. Some Jews in England are learning the Yiddish*

their grandparents spoke as a reassertion of European roots. How do you feel about this?

LB: Yiddish is as dead as Latin, it'll never be street language again. As a historian I have an ambivalent attitude to the past. Should my half-Irish, half-Jewish nephew schlep Jewish history on one shoulder and Irish history on the other? And, if you talk about Jewish heritage—what Jewish heritage—the bible?

Listen, I was in Syria in 1981, I talked to Jews there and realised they were Arabs; their food, their customs were completely Arabic. I've been to Northern Ireland and the Provs may be teaching Irish in the ghettos but the more the Catholics concentrate on that aspect, the less they can offer the Protestants.

CL: *Why should they?*

LB: Ireland and Israel are not dissimilar but only a minority of the oppressors will join the revolution. Remember Wolfe Tone was a Protestant.

CL: *How do you relate this to Israeli contemporary politics?*

LB: Communism came to Israel through the Jews not the Arabs. How can you talk of Arab nationalism when Maronite Arabs massacred Moslem Arabs at Sabra and Shatilla? As James Joyce said, history is a nightmare from which we're all trying to awaken.

CL: *Tell me more about your early politics.*

LB: I joined a radical movement at 15.

CL: *How do you define yourself?*

LB: As an independent Trotskyist. I have no loyalties to Jews, Arabs, Americans. Only to the oppressed. I reject nationalism utterly.

Years ago I used to sell dope with a Cuban, a black, and an Italian. We called ourself 'Spick, Spade, Wop and Kike'. In the US, ethnicity is a growth industry.

CL: *Have you been to Israel?*

LB: Yes, I stayed with the widow of one of the leaders of Neturei Karta (an orthodox anti-Zionist sect) in the most religious section of Jerusalem. I even wore a 'yamulka'.

CL: *And what did you make of Jerusalem?*

LB: The more holy a place the more boring. I am for the Palestinians. I don't care if they scalp the Israelis. On the other hand I might say 'Stop scalping the Israelis'.

CL: *Why?*

LB: The Palestinians are completely divided. The last couple of terrorist attacks were just to show that they're still around.

CL: *How involved are you with the PLO?*

LB: I'm going to see Yassir Arafat's brother tomorrow in London. As long as the PLO is doing what I relate to, I can work with them. But Arafat's current policy is one of compromise—he wants the US to help grant the West Bank.

CL: *What's the solution?*

LB: It's an Northern Ireland situation.

CL: *I disagree with you. What do you do with people who have experienced Hitler's death camps? You can't just label them as persecutors. That's too simple.*

LB: Well if they're not radicalised by now, nothing will radicalise them.

CL: *In your book you talk about Israelis finding 'The Right Answer'. What's that?*

LB: If you cannot give equality you are dooming yourself to endless war.

CL: *And the role of the PLO?*

LB: If you give the Palestinians their rights then their movement vanishes as Black Power did in the US. The Arabs cannot defeat the Zionists until they turn themselves into a genuine democratic structure. The PLO should recruit Jews and the Peace Now movement should recruit Arabs; the IRA recruit Protestants; the ANC recruit whites. If we didn't recruit blacks in the US there'd be few radicals.

CL: *You're saying that in the Middle East there's racism on both sides?*

LB: It's teeming. Both sides have got to get their act together.

CL: *On a completely different subject, do you read fiction?*

LB: US fiction is dead. Norman Mailer's a horse's ass. I once shared a room with Bob Dylan, now he's turned orthodox. The only writer today is Isaac Bashevis Singer.

CL: *A Yiddishist.*

LB: And he's not really American. He's still a foreigner. ■

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