

Ben Hecht & Yom Hashoah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Holocaust Day, Yom HaShoah, that the Jewish world commemorates is on the 27th of Nisan which falls this year Thursday May 2nd. An appropriate time to remember Ben Hecht. Colin Schindler has an excellent piece on him in the Jewish Chronicle "America's awakening to the Shoah." Two weeks ago, the New York Times Book Review published an article by Mark Horowitz about two new books on Ben Hecht. One "Ben Hecht, Fighting Words, Moving Pictures" by Adina Hoffman. The second by Julien Gorbach, "The Notorious Ben Hecht, Iconoclastic Writer and Militant Zionist."

Hecht was born into a struggling, orthodox migrant family in the Lower East Side of New York in 18. At 16 he ran away to Chicago. Starting at the bottom, he worked his way up to become a celebrated journalist. He moved to Hollywood where he was one of the most successful and celebrated writers of screenplays and dramas of the day. His work included "A star is Born," "Scarface," "Stagecoach," and "Wuthering Heights." He was also called in to re-write and save "Gone with the Wind." Horowitz writes of him

"Across four decades, Hecht worked on over 200 movies. He helped establish the ground rules for entire genres, including gangster film, the newspaper picture, the screwball comedy and post war film noir. Jean-Luc Godard said, "he invented 80% of what is used in Hollywood movies today."

The *Dictionary of Literary Biography – American Screenwriters* calls him

"one of the most successful screenwriters in the history of motion pictures". He received his first Academy award for "Underworld" in 1927. Film critic Richard Corliss called him "*the* Hollywood screenwriter", someone who "personified Hollywood itself". In 1940, he wrote, produced, and directed "Angels Over Broadway" which was nominated for Best Screenplay. In total, six of his movie screenplays were nominated for Academy Awards. In addition, he wrote over thirty-five books. According to his autobiography, he never spent more than eight weeks on a script. In 1983, 19 years after his death, Ben Hecht was posthumously inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame.

Hecht's time in Chicago left him completely disillusioned with politics and cynical about humanity. In Hollywood he refused to adopt the liberal, left-leaning biases that dominated the industry then as now. He thought them hypocrites and at best fair weather liberals. But he did not identify as Jewish in any way.

His interest in Jewish affairs began in the 1930s after he met the charismatic, Peter Bergson in New York. Bergson was actually Hillel Kook. A nephew of Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Eventually he would become a member of the Knesset. He was a passionate supporter of Jabotinsky and Revisionism, which not only believed in fighting for a Jewish homeland with arms rather than diplomacy, but also in maximalist Biblical territory from the

Mediterranean to the Euphrates. Bergson's task was to raise support, money and arms in the USA. Hecht became a devoted ally and supported the Irgun, Menahem Begin and the Right, in opposition to Ben Gurion's more moderate and diplomatic approach.

But in public, he continued to play down his Jewish identity. Until the rise of the Nazis opened his eyes to American anti-Semitism and the Jewish community's craven passivity in refusing to campaign openly for the USA to support or rescue European Jewry. When Joseph Kennedy, the pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic USA Ambassador to London visited Hollywood, Hecht wrote that "by the time Kennedy had finished his pro-German missionary work, most of the screen rajahs were convinced that the best course open to the Jews was to make themselves small and walk gently as if they had venereal diseases. This would keep people from motivating them and calling them warmongers."

Hecht paid for adverts across the country declaring "Action-Not Pity Can Save Millions-Act now." He wrote and published articles such as "The Extermination of the Jews" and spoke and organized meeting and rallies, notably a massive pageant "We Will Never Die" at Madison Garden and elsewhere in 1943. He published an article in the New York Times called "The Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe." It opened with this

"Four million Jews waiting for death! Oh, hang and burn but – quiet Jews! Don't be bothersome; save your breath – The world is busy with other news."

He was opposed by the Roosevelt administration, the State Department and the anti-Semitic campaigns of Henry Ford, Father Charles Coughlin, Charles Lindbergh and the pro German lobby in the USA. He had to fight the appeasing Reform leadership including Rabbi Stephen Wise who hated him for his brash, fearless campaigning and believed that quiet behind the scene lobbying would help more. Wise actually called Hecht a Nazi.

After the war he turned his energies back to Zionism, writing about the struggle in Palestine. He wrote the pro Zionist movie "A flag is Born" and best-selling "A Child of the Century." And later "Perfidy" about the Kastner trial. He campaigned against the British Mandate's policy of refusing entry to Jewish survivors of the Nazi camps. He supported illegal immigration. Which led to a British boycott and a ban of his work in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even after the British left, he helped fund shipments of arms to the Irgun, including the ill-fated *Altalena*.

For all this he did not describe himself as a Zionist, but simply a Jew.

What really fueled his anger was the apathy of most of American Jewry. Were he alive today, he would see how the circle has turned. After a period where American Jewry tried to atone by supporting Israel and memorializing the Holocaust, the present generation of American Jews seems to have lost its sense of commitment. Having lived without fear or danger they underestimate the threats to Jewish existence and seem more engaged by other values. I am as offended by those Jews who think that undermining Israel is good for the Jews, as I was by those who thought that by remaining silent, they knew what was best for the doomed Jews of Europe.

Attitudes towards Ben Hecht are still polarized as the two books I referred to above illustrate.

Adina Hoffman may be a better writer. But like too many of the Jewish Lives Series published by Yale, it is disappointingly light. And her political biases undermine her work. Having her write about Hecht was as inappropriate a decision as was Liverlight's in getting Toni Morrison to write a preface for Primo Levy's Collected Works. If you want a more balanced positive picture of the man and his achievements, read Gorbach.

I am not a fan of extremes. But survival matters more to me than niceties. Although I admired Menahem Begin, I don't think I could ever have supported Irgun and certainly not Lehi, any more than I support the extreme right in Israel today. But I certainly believe that American Jewry is making the same mistake of self-delusion it did then. And is absolutely wrong in trying to make Israel in its image. So that when we say "Never Again," we are not only referring to our enemies without, but also to those within.