

Billy Rose

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Who was Billy Rose? If you have visited the museum complex in Jerusalem, not far from the Knesset, you will be familiar with the Billy Rose sculpture garden. Designed by the renowned American Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi. Surrounded by the Judean hills, it lies in between the Israel Museum and the Shrine of the Book where the Dead Sea Scrolls are housed. And it contains the collection of modern sculpture that Billy Rose amassed and bequeathed to the State of Israel. That is why his name is still known in Israel. But elsewhere?

Billy Rose was born Samuel Rosenberg into poverty in New York in 1899. He died in 1966, a wealthy, famous man in Montego Bay. Between the two World Wars and beyond, he was one of the most famous and successful showbiz impresarios in the United States. At school, he had learnt to type. He won a speed dictation competition that earned him a job in Washington with the War Industries Board. He began his career as a stenographer. After the war, he established a reputation as a lyricist with a talent for choosing catchy songs and titles such as "Me and My Shadow." But an early biography claimed he exaggerated his contribution to a string of musicals and hit songs. His real talent was in having the flair to understand what people wanted from show business. Despite his size, he was four foot eleven, he was so tough as a negotiator that he was nicknamed the little Napoleon of showbiz. He was amongst the founders of the Songwriters Protective Association. A Trade Union for the music industry.

He came to dominate show business across America so thoroughly that he was featured on the cover of Time magazine. He produced a string of very successful extravaganzas, musicals and plays. Including one of my all-time favorites "Carmen Jones." A brilliant adaptation of Bizet's opera Carmen, to black ghetto life. His last major success, both as theater owner and producer, was in 1962 with Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" It won five Tony Awards. He had a huge ego. In 1940 he wanted a wartime position in government as head of Military Entertainment. He said in his letter of application that he should have the job because he knew everyone, had done everything in show business and had paid millions of dollars in taxes! He didn't get the job. His private life was not so successful. His first wife was Fanny Brice, the very popular vaudeville dancer, actress and comedienne (she too, was born into a Jewish family as Fania Borach). All his five marriages ended in divorce.

More relevant to this piece, he showed no interest in Jewish affairs whatsoever. Until the Nazi genocide and the rise of the Jewish State seemed to stir his dormant Jewish soul.

Mark Cohen has written a new biography. "Not Bad for Delancey Street: The Rise of Billy Rose, America's Great Jewish Impresario." I really recommend it for its insight into American life and entertainment during the last century

with all its good, bad and the ugly. You can hear him talk about his book if you are in New York on November 27th, at the 92nd Street Y.

And in the most recent Jewish Review of Books, there is a fascinating essay by Ruth Wisse linking Billy Rose to the Jewish Nobel Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow. He wrote a short story called "The Bellarosa Connection" (which, of course, is a play on Billy Rose's name). Based on a true story, it is about a Jew called Kurt Schwarz who was saved from the clutches of the Nazis thanks to Billy Rose, his money and his contacts. Schwarz was by no means the only one rescued by Billy Rose. But he desperately wanted to thank him personally when he came to the USA. And Billy Rose steadfastly refused to see him. We don't know why. One can speculate. Perhaps he did not feel he wanted or needed gratitude. Perhaps he thought he was simply doing his humanitarian and Jewish duty.

I was struck by the story of his life. Human beings are very quick to judge each other. To have preconceptions based on knowing just part of a person's life and deeds. Which is why in our tradition the highest level a person can reach is that of the *Tsaddik Nistar*, the Hidden Saint. The person who hides his or her true character and others know nothing about the good they do. In contrast to those who are busy with self-promotion, telling everyone else how great they are. Was Billy Rose a *Tsaddik Nistar*? Whichever way you look at it, he helped a lot of people. And he contributed to the establishment of the Jewish State.

To me, he symbolizes the Jew trying to escape his Jewish identity and assimilate into the American melting pot. And yet, in the end, his Jewish soul could not be denied. I believe it is important to recognize all the different ways of being Jewish and supporting the Jewish people. It is not always those most obviously involved in Jewish affairs or outwardly religious who do the most for the Jews or who reach the spiritual heights. As the Mishna says, you can repent the moment before you die and go to heaven. Perhaps that was what Billy Rose did!