

HELEN'S "HAND" - EPISODE 47

Hands up anyone who has not written/is not writing/does not plan to write a book on Helen Demidenko (nee Darville) and *The Hand That Signed The Paper* (nee *The Hand That Signed The Paper*).

Over half a year since Helen Demidenko (as she then was) won the 1995 Miles Franklin Award for her inaugural novel, the Australian media is still running stories on the affair. This time around the focus is on the books which Australia's very own literary cause celebre has produced.

NATALIE AND ANDREW

Natalie Jane Prior was first into print with *The Demidenko Diary* (Mandarin, 1996). According to the author's note in her book, Mr Prior is a children's book author who "lives in inner-city Brisbane with her husband Peter and bull terrier Ragnar".

Prior first met Helen Darville (as Demidenko) at the University of Queensland in March 1993. It seems that they last made contact in November 1995. Prior is a diarist and it seems that Darville scored around a dozen entries in Prior's diaries. According to the diarist, most were recorded in the fortnight following David Bentley's revelation in the *Courier Mail* in August 1995 that Demidenko (who claimed to be of Ukrainian/Irish background) was the daughter of British migrants.

Nine diary entries - from 20 August 1995 to 6 September 1995 - form the basis of *The Demidenko Diary*. There are also references to phone conversations and meetings which took place between Prior and Darville which did not make it into diarist mode.

Andrew Riemer was next out of the blocks with *The Demidenko Debate* (Allen & Unwin). Riemer is a Sydney based writer, critic and reviewer. For some years he was book review editor of *The Independent Monthly*. Prior to writing his book Riemer had met Demidenko at some literary functions. Before finalising *The Demidenko Debate* he met with

Darville in December 1995 in the presence of her Brisbane solicitor.

Andrew Riemer and Helen Demidenko/Darville are both published by Allen & Unwin. *The Demidenko Debate* shows evidence that the author benefited from his contacts with the publisher of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* - in terms of contacts made and access to source material.

AND JOHN AND ROBERT

Soon after *The Demidenko Debate* came *The Demidenko File* (Penguin) edited by John Jost, Gianna Totaro and Christine Tyshing. This may prove the most valuable book on *The Hand That Signed The Paper* affair. It deals with who said what, where and when in what Penguin terms "Australia's most inflammatory literary debate".

Like *The Demidenko Diary* and *The Demidenko Debate*, John Jost's *The Demidenko File* contains no index. But its sources - reviews, articles, press reports, radio and television exchanges - are arranged in chronological order. *The Demidenko File* begins with the early (mainly favourable) reviews of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* in late 1993 and concludes with Dame Leonie Kramer's interview with journalist Julie Posetti on ABC Radio AM.

It is one of the strengths of *The Demidenko File* that the editors made few judgements of their own - leaving readers to come to their own opinions. Take the Posetti/Kramer interview for example. Kramer told Posetti that "none of the people who are the principal critics" of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* had criticised the book for anti-semitism when it was believed that Helen Demidenko was of Ukrainian background.

Now - as *The Demidenko File* demonstrates - Professor Kramer's claim is completely false. For example, *Age* columnist Pamela Bone objected to *The Hand That Signed The Paper's* anti-semitism in June 1995 - months before the revelation of Helen

Darville's true identity. Yet John Jost and his co-editors are prepared to leave what they term "the last word" to Leonie Kramer - in spite of the fact that Kramer's claim is contradicted by some of the documents contained in the 300 pages of extracts which comprise *The Demidenko File*.

All that remains in this publishing round is Robert Manne's *The Strange Case of Helen Demidenko* to be published by Text in June 1996. Associate Professor Manne is a La Trobe University academic and the editor of *Quadrant* magazine.

Robert Manne was something of a late starter in *The Hand That Signed The Paper* debate but after a while became one of its author's strongest critics. In a debate with Andrew Riemer on ABC TV's Bookchat program (which went to air in July 1995), Manne told presenter Caroline Baum that he felt uncomfortable entering into a debate over *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. Robert Manne told Caroline Baum:

This particular debate has had a sort of ferocity which I regret...and I wouldn't want to be part of it. But if you want to see why it had this ferocity, it is a fact that there is an unassimilated anti-semitic kind of viewpoint put across which I don't think Helen Demidenko understood.

AND ANDREW AGAIN

During the same discussion Andrew Riemer was asked by Caroline Baum to comment on the nature of the debate over *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. Riemer replied: "Well, I don't think it's a debate". Soon after the *Bookchat* discussion Robert Manne joined in the "ferocity" of the debate over *The Hand That Signed The Paper* and signed up with Text to produce a tome on the affair. Around the same time Allen & Unwin announced that Andrew Riemer would be writing a book to be titled *The Demidenko Debate*. How times change.

Well, what do the works by Natalie Jane Prior and Andrew Riemer tell us about *The Hand That Signed The Paper* and its author? Regrettably, not as much as they tell us about Ms Prior and Dr Riemer.

PRIOR NAILS DARVILLE ANTI-SEMITISM

Natalie Jane Prior's *The Demidenko Diary* is a slight book. But it could be commercially successful. Not only was Prior first into print. More importantly her book contains much gossip and some rumour. This is more likely to be of interest to book buyers than, say,

a critique of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* as a post modernist phenomenon.

Well, who is Helen Darville? According to the author she is a "complete oddball" to whom "lying comes as naturally... as breathing". And that's just for starters. Prior also reveals that Darville "has some sort of strange hang-up about Jews". Indeed the author found her "antipathy toward Jews... tiresome, ugly and offensive". Prior also recounts how Darville regarded any criticisms of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* as part of a "huge Zionist conspiracy".

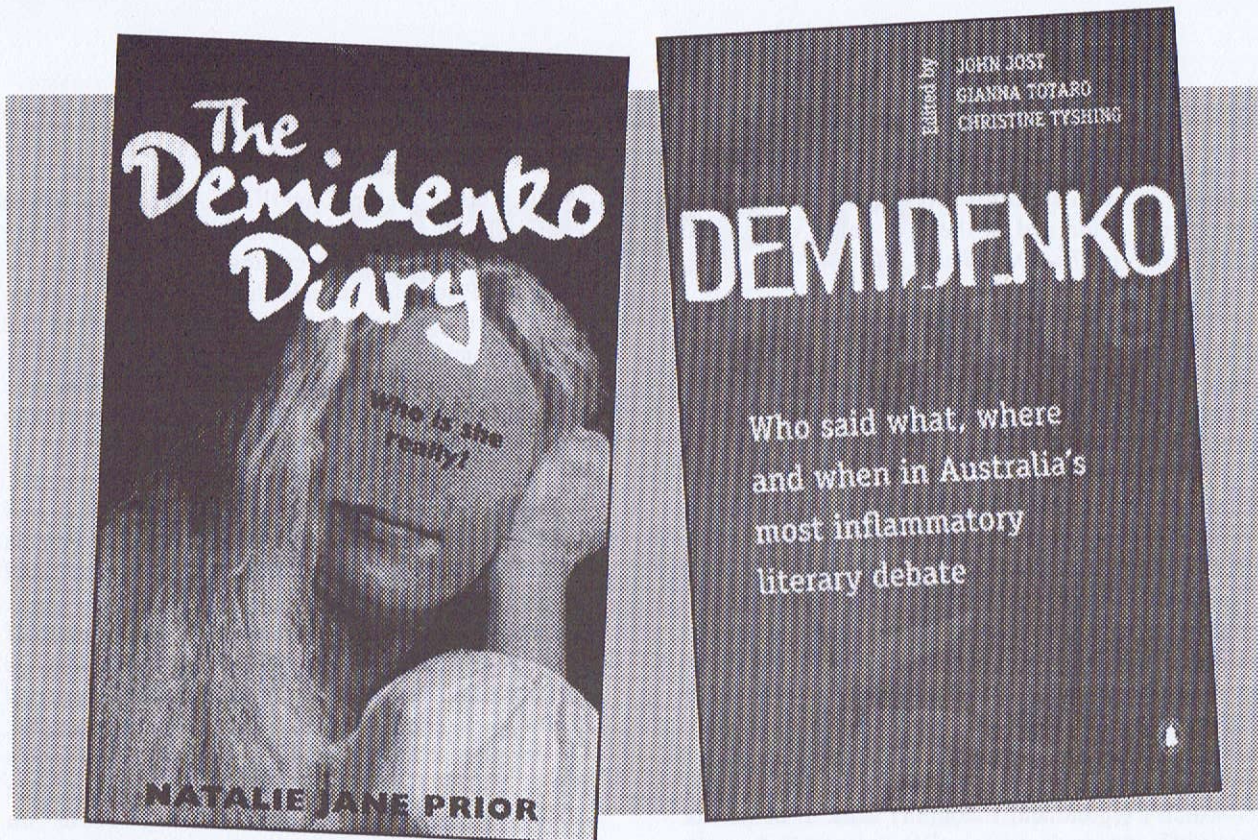
The Demidenko Diary lends weight to the theory of some early critics - including *Age* columnist Pamela Bone and historian Jacques Adler - that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* is an anti-semitic tract. Moreover it supports the view of Paul Gadaloff (a former personal friend of Darville who is acknowledged in the inaugural edition of *The Hand That Signed The Paper*) that Darville is anti-semitic. On 28 August 1995 Gadaloff told the *7.30 Report's* Beeta Vahdt that Demidenko/Darville "became obsessed with repainting history from an anti-Holocaust perspective" and had become "obsessed with Jews".

Anti-semitism aside, there are few insights into *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. Prior concedes early on that she "did not research this book" and later concedes that she is not equipped to enter into discussion about its historical accuracy. Also Prior admits that she did not follow the controversy which erupted following the decision of judges Jill Kitson, Leonie Kramer, Harry Heseltine and Adrian Mitchell to award the 1995 Miles Franklin Award to *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. According to Prior she was travelling in Australia at the time and "missed most of the media coverage which was generated in the next month or so..." Apparently she does not read newspapers or listen to radio when outside of Brisbane.

LUNAR RIGHT LINK NOT EXPLAINED

Natalie Jane Prior returned to Brisbane shortly before Helen Demidenko's identity was revealed in the *Courier Mail*. Her first diary entry on the affair was written on 20 August 1995 and the final entry is dated 6 September 1995. Much of the material in *The Demidenko Diary* (apart from Prior's reports on her conversations with Darville and her assessments of Darville's anti-semitism) is based on little more but hearsay.

For all that *The Demidenko Diary* is a racy read. We



learn what Darville had for breakfast - on one occasion "a full English breakfast of sausage, egg and fried bread", on another just "Nutri Grain and an egg". Also we learn of Prior's own attitudes when, along with some others, she was protecting the 1995 Miles Franklin Award winner from the media.

Once Darville's demeanour became so oppressive that Prior "couldn't stand it any longer [and] went and hid in the toilet". Then there was the time when the pressure was so great that the author of *The Demidenko Diary* "just freaked". Yet another entry records that "a car door has slammed and my roast is in the oven". Fancy that.

Others, too, were involved in the drama. Dog "Raggie seemed to sense that something was wrong; she kept going to Helen... as if to say, 'What's the matter?'". And Allen & Unwin managing director Patrick Gallagher was heard to opine that "he was sure" that Darville's blonde (Ukrainian style) hair "was natural". For the record, it wasn't.

Perhaps some readers will find such trivia of interest. However the essential weakness of *The Demidenko Diary* is that it fails to address the historical flaws both in Helen Darville's *The Hand That Signed The Paper* and in comments which she made outside the book - both in print and on the electronic media.

Helen Demidenko/Darville maintained the discredited Lunar Right theory that Judaism and Bolshevism were one and the same. For added effect she (falsely) asserted that Jewish Bolsheviks had murdered her paternal grandfather. No doubt some will be interested in what the Miles Franklin Award winner had for breakfast. Others will want to know what motivated a young writer to embrace the most discredited piece of Lunar Right propaganda. Unfortunately the answer is not to be found in *The Demidenko Diary*.

Helen Darville attempted to distract attention from Prior's book by contributing an article to *The Weekend Australian*. It received page one treatment on Saturday 6 January 1996. Darville's article was a newsy piece but quite light. She simply avoided all the serious criticisms of both her behaviour and *The Hand That Signed the Paper*.

ANDREW RIEMER'S SELF CONTRADICTIONS

Then along came Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate*. This is a self-important and contradictory work which contains serious distortions and misquotations. For a scholar of Riemer's standing, this is surprising. Perhaps it reflects the intensity of debate over *The Hand That Signed The Paper*.

On pages 219-220 of *The Demidenko Debate* Riemer writes:

One significant element in the debate has been that not even the most passionate of the novel's detractors made appeals for the expansion of formal censorship to embrace material such as *The Hand That Signed The Paper* contains; though some campaigned vigorously to ensure that it would be excluded from school syllabuses and kept off the shelves of school libraries. In every case, even with Louise Adler's lament over the irresponsibility of Darville's publishers or Jane Epstein's agonised denunciations of the latent anti-Semitism of Australian cultural life, the emphasis has been thrown onto the reprehensible way in which the author, her publishers and literary panels are supposed to have conducted themselves. The plea was, in other words, for restraint, essentially for self-censorship. Clearly, given the nature of contemporary social and political priorities, the exercise of restraint is far preferable to the formal imposition of constraints by legal and administrative means.

In short Riemer concedes that "not even the most passionate of the novel's detractors" sought to censor *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. Yet in *The Demidenko Debate* Riemer accuses critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* of "persecution" (p.12), "illiberal bigotry" (p.13), "fundamentalist theological invective" (p.75), "cultural totalitarianism" (p.83), "self-righteous fundamentalism" (p.105), "theological persecution" (p. 105) and engaging in a "witch hunt" (p.148).

That's just for starters. Andrew Riemer went right over the top by linking criticism of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* with the "Inquisition's persecution of heretical writers" (p.120) and the Nazi Party's "great 1938 bonfire of books in Berlin" (p.120). In case this hyperbole was not enough, Riemer also accused Darville's critics of possessing "the totalitarian spirit" (p.170) and as enemies of "the traditions of liberal humanism" (p.171). *The Demidenko Debate* also accuses critics of Darville of tactics "uncomfortably reminiscent of the rhetorical and polemical devices totalitarian systems employ to discredit those who hold opinions falling outside narrowly-defined margins of acceptability" (p. 156). Riemer also makes comparisons to "certain Islamic theocracies" (p.166).

So, according to Andrew Riemer, the critics of *The*

Hand That Signed The Paper can be compared with those who held the power during the Inquisition and Adolf Hitler's time. In essence they are "totalitarian" opponents of "liberal humanism". Yet, as Riemer also acknowledges, these alleged enemies of free speech did not call for censorship. Work that out if you can. This from an author who lectures critics of Helen Darville for their (alleged) "discourtesy" and for transgressing "certain conventional boundaries of intellectual discourse and debate".

There are similar contradictions in Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate* - most of which were subjected to a devastating review by Robert Manne in *The Weekend Australian* on 27-28 January 1996. Attention should also be given to Andrew Riemer's use - or, rather misuse, of source material. Some examples illustrate the point.

RIEMER'S SELECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Guy Rundle (co-editor of *Arena* magazine) wrote an article in *The Age* on 23 August 1995 which included the following statement:

As to Allen & Unwin, who have taken the book to five printings largely on the strength of a tissue of lies, they should withdraw the book forthwith; any reprint should have an explicit note regarding the authorship.

In *The Demidenko Debate* (at p.151) Andrew Riemer simply omitted the underlined section - thus (incorrectly) implying that Rundle had advocated that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* should be withdrawn without qualification. In a letter published in *The Weekend Australian* (27-28 January 1996) Rundle accused Riemer of having attributed to him a position which he (Rundle) had "never taken".

Andrew Riemer's unprofessionalism does not end there. Riemer also selectively quoted from an article written in *The Age* by Anne Henderson (6 July 1995). Henderson wrote of her experiences some years ago when, as a university student, she was given an anti-semitic book written by a Catholic priest Fr Patrick Gearon (who wrote his political tracts under the nom de plume "Advance Australia"):

Father Gearon's conservative view was anti-communist, something not unusual for a Catholic of the time. Coming from a family that had gone with the Democratic Labor Party after the Labor Split, I found that easy to go along with. Then I noticed my anti-communism and his weren't the same.

Andrew Riemer simply omitted the underlined section. He then used the selective quote to argue the quite false proposition that Catholic anti-semitism was a factor in bringing about the Labor Split in Victoria in the 1950s and in the formation of the Democratic Labor Party. Such a statement demonstrates that Riemer knows nothing (or next to nothing) about Labor politics in Victoria in the 1950s. From a selective quote he draws an erroneous conclusion - without any evidence, of course.

HOLOCAUST DENIAL INVENTED

Then there is the issue of Holocaust denial. Andrew Riemer asserts - without any evidence - that those who criticised *The Hand That Signed The Paper* saw it as a Holocaust denial tract. At p.127 of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* Riemer comments:

...the denial of the Holocaust which the novel's most strenuous detractors detect in it is close to a technicality of the kind that led to the persecution of Salman Rushdie. The denial of the Holocaust detected in the novel and deplored by most of those who found both *The Hand That Signed The Paper* and the awards it received offensive and even indicative, perhaps, of the fundamental anti-Semitism of Australian culture, depends on distinctions...between Jew-hating and anti-Semitism, and therefore between the Holocaust and other instances of genocide.

Once again Andrew Riemer's statement is quite false. Since Gerard Henderson is singled out for special criticism in *The Demidenko Debate*, it is worth reporting what he wrote in *Media Watch* Issue 34 No 3 1995:

Helen Demidenko is not into Holocaust denial. Not at all. She maintains that the Holocaust took place - of which the September 1941 massacre of the Jews at Babi Yar was just a part - as was the murder of Jews at the Treblinka death camp (near Warsaw) where Ukrainian Nazis worked. It was to be expected. The Jews got what was coming to them as a result of their association with Soviet communism. Viewed in this light, the Holocaust was close to inevitable. An average person placed in the same situation would have performed much the same as the character Vitaly in *The Hand That Signed the Paper*.

In *The Demidenko Debate* Andrew Riemer quotes from the subsequent paragraph in Gerard Henderson's *Media Watch* article - so clearly he had read the

Media Watch article in question. Yet Riemer chose to ignore the above quoted material because it did not suit his theory. Riemer's theory is that the critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* maintained that it was a Holocaust denial tract. The fact is that few, if any, critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* accused its author of denying the Holocaust.

ALL TOO MANY HOWLERS

There are similar such misrepresentations/inaccuracies in Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate*.

- Riemer claims that the "more vehement" critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* lacked a "familiarity with literary discourse" and that their case "seemed initially to have been weakened because of their inability to argue or present their misgivings in coherent literary terms". (p.74).

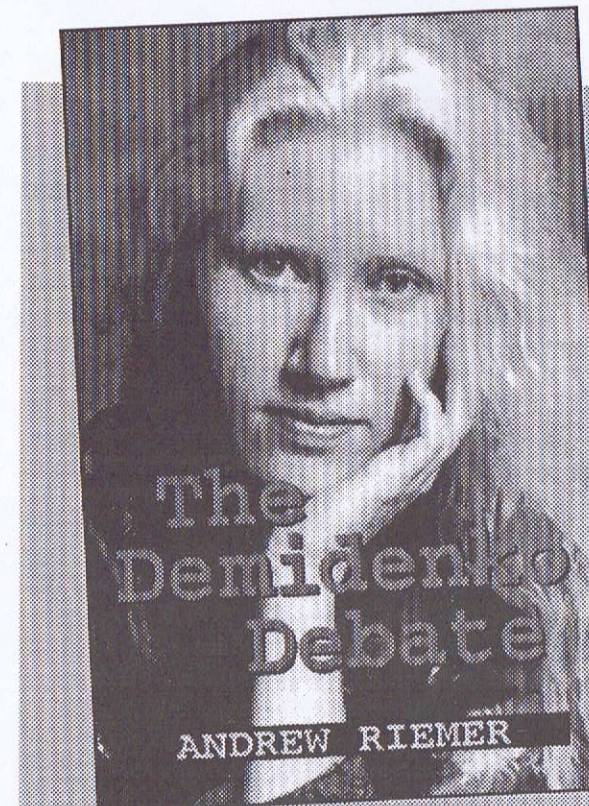
In fact some of the leading critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* are more than familiar with "literary discourse" and "literary terms" - including Stephanie Dowrick, Helen Elliott, Kate Grenville, Ivor Indyk, Richard Flanagan and Louise Adler.

- Riemer asserts that the campaign against *The Hand That Signed The Paper* was "rejigged and redirected towards the one surviving area of potent left-wing, even Marxist or at least neo-Marxist, influence in contemporary Australia: universities and particularly academics in the humanities". In other words, Riemer maintains that the leftists were defending *The Hand That Signed The Paper* which was being attacked by conservatives.

Once again, this is simply false. The fact is that a number of leading critics of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* were of the left (in old style terminology). For example Guy Rundle, Ramona Koval, Peter Christoff and Joanna Murray-Smith. Moreover many supporters of Helen Demidenko were conservatives (in old style terminology) - including Leonie Kramer, Frank Devine, P.P. McGuinness and Paul Gray. But why let facts spoil a good (Riemer) theory?

- Riemer alleges that, despite the predictions of some critics, *The Hand That Signed The Paper* was not welcomed by Lunar Right (i.e. extreme right wing) groups in Australia. At page 179 of *The Demidenko Debate* Riemer writes:

If Darville had intended to utter prejudices in a



Andrew Riemer maintains that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* did not give comfort to the Lunar Right.

quasi-fictional form which would comfort those sectors of Australian society that Gerard Henderson characterised as the Lunar Right, her novel failed in that ambition.

Once again, this statement is quite false. Eric Butler's League of Rights is Australia's leading Lunar Right group. Had Andrew Riemer done even minimal research he would have found widespread praise in the League's own journals for *The Hand That Signed The Paper* as a book which revealed the (alleged) link between Jews and Bolsheviks.

For example, in its issue of 21 July 1995 *On Target* advised that there was increased demand for Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed The Paper* and that the League of Rights expected "to have stocks available from each League book service...by the end of the month". *On Target* also advised that the July 1995 issue of the League's *Intelligence Survey* publication would contain an analysis of Demidenko's book. *On Target* editorialised that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* had discussed "the issue of Ukrainian involvement in the Holocaust as against the background of the involvement of Jewish Bolsheviks in the forced Ukrainian famines of 1930-33".

Now the League does not plug books or authors unless they have gained its support. Clearly Andrew Riemer's assertion that *The Hand That Signed The*



But League of Rights supremo Eric Butler believes otherwise - here he praises Helen D's opus magnum to the Lunar Right faithful.

Paper did not give "comfort" to the Lunar Right simply does not stand up.

This was made manifestly clear when Eric Butler waved *The Hand That Signed The Paper* in his hand at the annual conference of the League of Rights (held at Victoria Hotel in Melbourne in October 1995). As Eli Greenblat reported in *Australia-Israel Review* on 18 November 1995:

Large piles of the book were openly on sale during the League conference, neatly stacked alongside a number of works denying the Holocaust. Butler was eager to promote *The Hand That Signed The Paper* as he spoke to the hushed crowd at the end of the evening. Holding the book in his right hand he promoted it as a "good buy because it successfully showed who was really behind the Bolsheviks". He spoke at great length about its value as an important historical text. Butler praised Darville's work as a "truthful account of which ethnic group was really behind the Soviet Union and the Bolsheviks"...

"We couldn't get enough", said a sales assistant who would only identify herself as Leonie from the League of Rights bookshop in Melbourne. "It was very popular. We sold out".

Media Watch has obtained from *Australia-Israel Review* a photo of Eric Butler, a copy of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* in hand, addressing the 1995 League of Rights annual conference. Butler only promotes books which give him, and the League, political comfort. Yet Andrew Riemer asserted - without any evidence, of course - that the Lunar Right got no "comfort" from the publication from the work of Helen Demidenko/Darville.

POSTSCRIPT : RE-ENTER JUDITH ARMSTRONG

Melbourne academic Judith Armstrong reviewed the first three books on *The Hand That Signed The Paper* controversy in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 February 1996). Professor Armstrong didn't like Natalie Prior's work and failed to mention that she was in the John Jost selection. She was full of praise for Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate* maintaining, inter alia, that it restores "our self-respect". All up, Judith Armstrong gave Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate* "unqualified praise".

Judith Armstrong failed to mention at any stage in her lengthy review that she herself played a prominent part in the early stages of the Demidenko debate. Writing in *The Age* on 17 June 1995 she defended *The Hand That Signed The Paper* against the criticism of *Age* columnist Pamela Bone. There Dr Armstrong commented :

Demidenko's story is concerned with the 1930s, when Stalin was still allowing Jews to contribute to the brutal crushing of Ukraine by

collectivisation and starvation and the slaughter of nationalists.

The implication of Armstrong's *Age* article was that Jews were responsible for Moscow's forced famine in the Ukraine in the early 1930s. This is manifestly false. That policy was decided by Joseph Stalin and his fellow members of the Communist Party politburo.

In view of the fact that Judith Armstrong was one of the earliest defenders of the "faction" of Helen Demidenko/Darville, it is hardly surprising that she is an avowed supporter of Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate*. But her failure to mention her own role in *The Hand That Signed The Paper* is less than professional. Moreover her equating of the Allied bombing of Hiroshima with Adolf Hitler's Holocaust against the Jews as equivalent acts of "large-scale murder" will surprise many. Perhaps even Andrew Riemer.

CONCLUSION - SILENCE OVER (FALSE) ALLEGATION OF MURDER

- Finally there are the sins of omission in Andrew Riemer's *The Demidenko Debate*. In an article which she contributed to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 27 June 1995 Helen Demidenko wrote : "Most of my father's family, including my grandfather, were killed by Jewish Communist Party officials in Vynnstya".

What does Andrew Riemer say about this grossly mendacious claim in his book? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

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The photo of Helen Darville in *Media Watch* No. 34 was erroneously described as taken after her alleged Ukrainian background was revealed as a fake. In fact this was the original Allen & Unwin portrait. The photo of Eric Butler in this issue was originally published in *Australia-Israel Review*.