

THE WINNER, THE JUDGES, THEIR SUPPORTERS AND THE PUBLISHER - THE 1995 MILES FRANKLIN AWARD

It all started quietly enough with nothing much above a whimper. The bang came later and is still resounding.

And the winner is...

Date - Thursday 1 June 1995. Place - State Library of New South Wales, Phillip Street, Sydney. Time - early evening. Occasion - the announcement of the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize which in 1995 had attracted a record 60 entries.

David Davis (managing director of Perpetual Trustees, Miles Franklin's executors) announced that Helen Demidenko had won the 1995 Miles Franklin Award for *The Hand That Signed The Paper* (Allen & Unwin, 1994). Jill Kitson then read the judges report. The judges for the 1995 Miles Franklin Award were Jill Kitson, Harry Heseltine, Dame Leonie Kramer and Adrian Mitchell.

Early on in their report the judges commented that "novels about the migrant experience seem to us to be seizing the high ground in contemporary Australian fiction, in contrast to fictions about the more vapid aspects of Australian life". The judges added that "migrant experience" novelists "...are incorporating into the cultural memory first-hand experience of the major historical events of the century, events from which Australia has been largely insulated, but which are a growing component of contemporary Australian life - even to the extent of requiring of us intricate moral judgement, as the recent debate over the war crimes legislation highlighted". The judges concluded that "Helen Demidenko's first novel displays a powerful literary imagination coupled to a strong sense of history, and brings to light a hitherto unspeakable aspect of the

Australian migrant experience".

There commenced a round of soft media interviews. Followed by partying. That evening the Allen & Unwin team celebrated the 1995 Miles Franklin award at an inner city Sydney restaurant. Helen Demidenko, dressed in Ukrainian gear, taught Allen & Unwin publishing staff some Ukrainian folk dancing steps. What bliss.

It was much the same some time earlier when Helen Demidenko first (and, so far, only) novel was awarded the 1993 Australian/Vogel Award for writers under the age of 35. Praise by the literati was followed by sympathetic media reports.

Pamela Bone's inaugural salvo

Had Helen Demidenko won the Australian/Vogel award and no more, it is unlikely that her novel would have aroused interest outside Australia's literary establishment. However the Miles Franklin Award attracts considerable attention. After Helen Demidenko's victory over such writers as Kate Grenville and Peter Carey, it was not surprising that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* attracted much interest along with some criticism.

Age columnist Pamela Bone was the first critic to express concern about the inherent anti-semitism of *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. She was followed soon after by Melbourne historian Jacques Adler. Gerard Henderson's critique of Helen Demidenko was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* on 27 June 1995 and in the *Brisbane Courier Mail* the following day.

After Tuesday 27 June 1995 what had commenced as a literary whimper became a loud bang which

reverberated within the Australian media.

Helen Demidenko asserts - in stages

On the morning of 27 June 1995 the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* published a commissioned article by Helen Demidenko. In it the author claimed:

(i) that she was a "lawyer by training" who had spent a "good part" of her life in "courtrooms" and, consequently, understood the nature of war crimes trials.

(ii) that "most" of her "father's family", including her grandfather, "were killed by Jewish Communist Party officials in Vynntsy".

(iii) that her background was "Irish-Ukrainian".

In time each of the above written statements turned out to be manifestly false. On the evening of 27 June 1995 Helen Demidenko debated *The Hand That Signed The Paper* on ABC TV's 7.30 Report. The discussion was carried that evening in New South Wales and soon after in the other States.

In her debate with Gerard Henderson, Demidenko claimed that she wrote *The Hand That Signed The Paper* because she "experienced, as a Ukrainian-Australian person, a great deal of personal unpleasantness as a result of the war crimes trials". She also complained that it was "a little bit worrying when someone who is not Jewish begins to speak for the Jewish community".

The first statement was false; the second disturbingly anti-semitic.

After Helen Demidenko's appearance on the 7.30 Report, the 1995 Miles Franklin Award winner became a matter of controversy in Australia and even roused some international interest.

A judicial cop-out

Clearly the worth of any particular novel is a matter of judgment and taste. Consequently it is impossible to "prove" that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* is a better - or worse - book than, say, Kate Grenville's *Dark Places*. However it is reasonable to expect that judges will at least explain their reasons for their decision and justify their judges' statement. Such was not the case with the 1995 Miles Franklin Award.

On no fewer than three instances Jill Kitson, Harry Heseltine, Leonie Kramer and Adrian Mitchell had

an opportunity to enter the debate over *The Hand That Signed The Paper* but comprehensively squibbed it. As a result the standing of Australia's most important literary prize has been diminished.

At issue - consistency

Clause 6 of the will of Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin requires that a prize be awarded "for the novel for the year which is of the highest literary merit and which must present Australian life in any of its phases". In 1994 the Miles Franklin Award judges held that a number of works - including Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days* - were ineligible for consideration because they did not meet the terms of Miles Franklin's will. In other words, *Grand Days* was held not to "present Australian life in any of its phases".

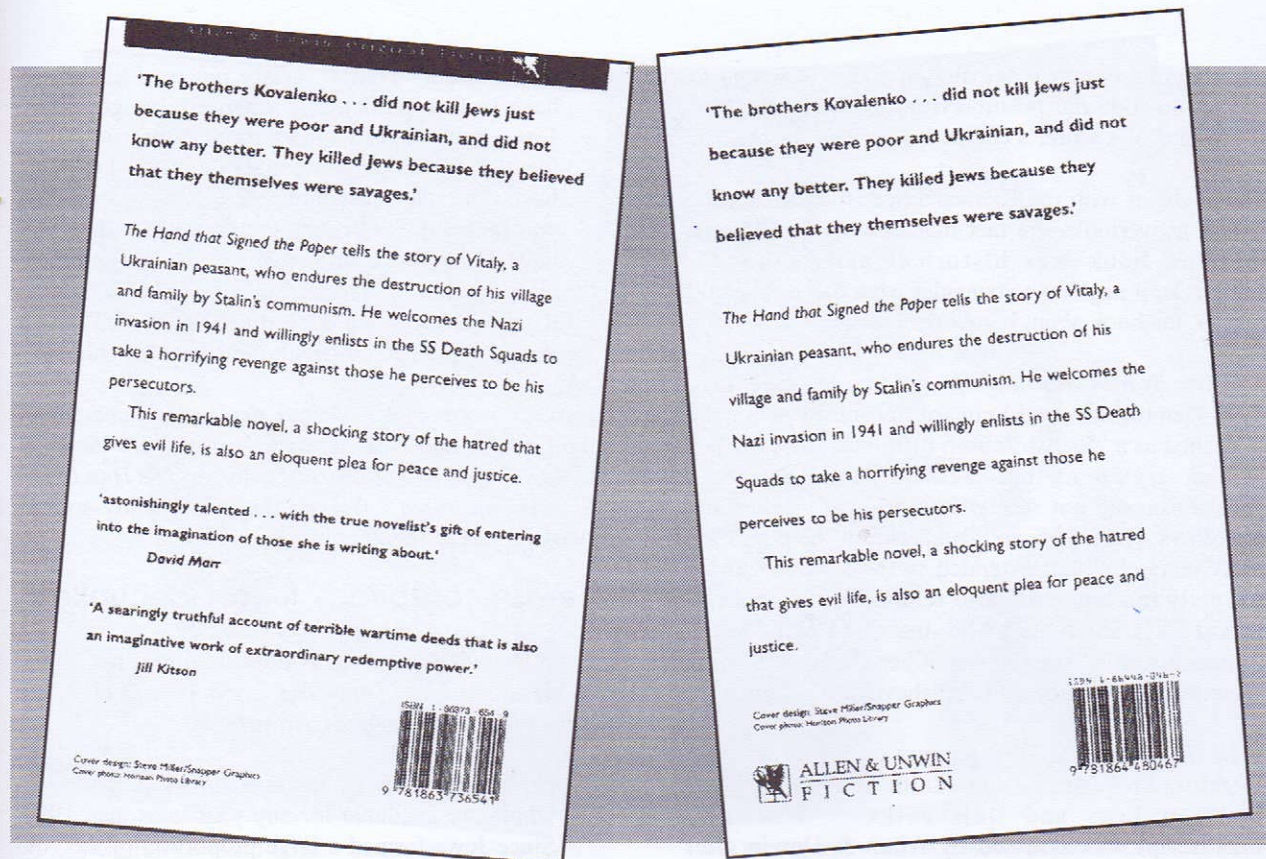
This seemed a harsh judgment. Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days* tells the story of a female diplomat who left Australia between the wars to pursue a career at the League of Nations in Geneva. The bulk of the novel is set in Switzerland. Compare and contrast. Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed The Paper* tells the story of a Nazi murderer who leaves the Ukraine in the late 1940s to settle in Australia. The bulk of the novel is set in Ukraine and Poland.

Clearly either both *Grand Days* and *The Hand That Signed the Paper* should be eligible to win the Miles Franklin Award - or neither should. The better judgment would be that both novels depict Australian life in at least one of its phases. Yet the judges excluded *Grand Days* in 1994 while short-listing *The Hand That Signed The Paper* the following year. How come? No one knows. For neither Jill Kitson, nor Harry Heseltine, nor Leonie Kramer, nor Adrian Mitchell are willing to comment.

At issue - a sense of history

Then there is the issue of history. In their report, the judges praised Helen Demidenko's "strong sense of history". But when Demidenko "history" was challenged, those judges who were willing to comment said that *The Hand That Signed The Paper* had won the 1995 Miles Franklin Award purely as a work of fiction. It was not just a matter of moving the goal posts. The judges actually decided to relocate the venue.

In the author's note to *The Hand That Signed The Paper* Helen Demidenko wrote that "it would be ridiculous to pretend that this book is unhistorical".



The vanishing endorsements. David Marr and Jill Kitson were prepared to endorse Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (see left) but not the Helen Darville edition (see right)

Interviewed by Caroline Baum on ABC TV's *Bookchat Magazine* on 25 June 1995 Demidenko stated that the book was "faction" - part fact and part fiction. She added: "You can't write about historical events like the Ukrainian famine and the Holocaust and pretend that it didn't happen."

Since the judges praised *The Hand That Signed the Paper*'s "sense of history", and since the author claimed that her book was historical, it makes sense to analyse the nature of the history that the judges saw fit to praise.

The Hand's historical thesis

The essential historical thesis of *The Hand That Signed the Paper* is as follows. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was essentially a Jewish affair in that Jews and Bolsheviks were virtually synonymous. Consequently the crimes of Soviet communism were also the crimes of Jews. The appalling forced famine in the Ukraine of 1932-33, in which some six million Ukrainians died, is a case in point. After all, Lazar Kaganovich - Josef Stalin's henchman in the Ukraine - was a Jew. Case closed. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 (after the demise of the Nazi-Soviet Pact) it was obvious that gentile

Ukrainians would side with gentle German Nazis. This was their chance to revenge the forced famine of a decade previously which had been inflicted on Ukrainian gentiles by Jewish Bolsheviks. Consequently it was no surprise that Ukrainians became Nazi savages bent on the revenge killing of Ukrainian Jews. Hence the September 1941 massacre of Ukrainian Jews at Babi Yar. Hence the willingness of some Ukrainians to join with the Nazis in the mass murder of Jews.

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*.

Some defenders of Helen Demidenko - most notably Andrew Riemer and Peter Singer - have run the familiar "judge the tale, not the teller" defence. In

other words, fiction is but fiction and it is wrong to project an authorial position from the behaviour and statements of a writer's characters.

The problem with the Riemer/Singer line of defence is that it overlooks the fact that Demidenko claimed that her book was historical and "faction". Moreover, it neglects to consider what the author said outside the book about her work.

- In her *Sydney Morning Herald* article of 27 June 1995 Demidenko cited Leonard Schapiro (whom she described as a "British Jewish historian") as evidence for her argument that "Jewish participation in Bolshevism did not stop with the Kaganoviches and Sverdlovs, Kamenevs and Bukharins at the top of the party hierarchy" but extended to the lower levels of the party machine. She also referred to the work of David Cesarani (whom she described as a "noted Zionist historian") in support of her claim concerning "Jewish collaboration with Bolshevism".

- In the ABC TV 7.30 Report on 27 June 1995 Demidenko repeated her claim about the nexus between Jews and Bolsheviks: "When my manuscript was assessed by Allen & Unwin after winning the Vogel, it was checked by a gentleman who was a professor of Russian Ukrainian history at Sydney University...Bukharin's name was included in my list of Jewish Bolsheviks at that time and this gentleman commented that the list of communist leaders of Jewish origin given...is correct and far from exhaustive." At no stage during the subsequent debate did Helen Demidenko or her publisher Allen & Unwin disclose the name of this alleged source.

- Interviewed by SBS TV's *Bookmark* presenter Andrea Stretton on 6 June 1995, Helen Demidenko ran much the same line. In response to a question, she acknowledged that in *The Hand That Signed The Paper* Jews and communists are thrown together in Andrea Stretton's terminology "as one big lump against which the Ukrainians fought". Demidenko maintained that from her "research" that was how she saw it:

Stalin's commissar the Ukraine, Lazar Kaganovich, was Jewish. Most of the senior officials in the Ukraine in the organisation of the famine were Jewish. They had chips on their shoulders from the appalling treatment that they'd had at the hands of the Tzar. So it's this cyclical nature of revenge. Now they were implicated in the perpetration of a terrible piece of brutality in the same way that Ukrainians were implicated in

one as well. That's a nasty piece of history to have to face particularly when you've got many Jews, not all, but many have constructed an identity around victimhood and lots of Ukrainians have done the same thing too. And so therefore you're dealing with very touchy issues when you have to say those who have been victimised have also victimised. You know, have had it done unto them and have then done it unto others. That's a very complex and difficult issue to deal with.

In other words Helen Demidenko's comments about the Ukraine under Soviet and Nazi rule are identical to those made by her characters inside *The Hand That Signed The Paper*. But are they historically sound? Answer - emphatically no.

Jewish conspiracy theory debunked

Even Demidenko's sources do not support her thesis. In his authoritative study *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, Leonard Schapiro wrote:

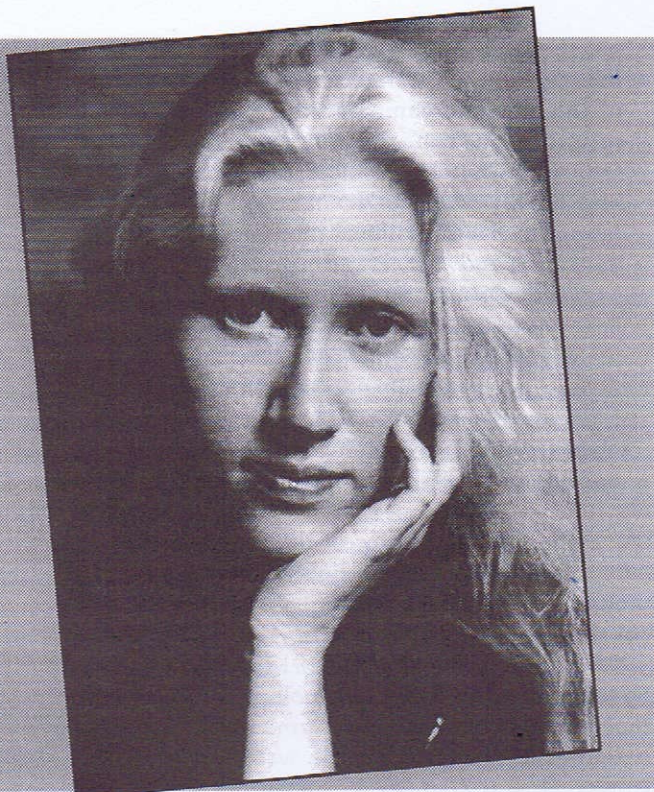
No figures of Jewish membership of the party as a whole are available for any year later than 1927. Since Jews formed a large proportion of the "old Bolsheviks", they suffered accordingly in the purges of the late 30's, and no evidence is available to show to what extent the losses were made up by subsequent recruitment. The extent of representation of Jews in the party is, however, perhaps of little relevance to party policy towards the Jews, since in general Jewish party members were as much if not more opposed to the fostering of Jewish nationalism and to Zionism than non-Jewish members. For a short time during the war Jewish nationalism was encouraged and stimulated, but solely for the purpose of mobilising Jewish opinion in the Western world for the fight against Hitler.

In the introduction to *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917* (edited by Lionel Kochan), Leonard Schapiro commented that "there can be no doubt of the fact that Russian Jews thronged into the revolutionary movement in great numbers" in the years before 1917. But he added that the so-called Jewish revolutionaries did not see themselves as Jewish:

Thus the Jewish revolutionary usually broke decisively with his Jewish past - a fact which was to have important consequences for Soviet Jewry. When so many Jews came to power in the wake of the Bolshevik victory of November 1917 their aim, so far as the Jews were concerned, was to



David Marr as pictured on his Patrick White biography



The brand new Allen & Unwin approved photo of Helen Darville. The Demidenko/Ukrainian gear seems to have gone to the local op-shop.

achieve their total assimilation, in an atheist society. For the most part they showed even less sympathy than did the non-Jewish Bolsheviks for the national, cultural or religious aspirations of their former co-religionists.

Writing in *The Age* on 6 July 1995, Anne Henderson commented that Helen Demidenko's world-view reminded her of the extreme right wing anti-semitic tract *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. First published in Russia in 1902 subsequently updated, the message of the *Protocols* was that Jews were responsible for all the world's ills - from capitalism to communism and (later) on to Nazism. After 1917 the *Protocols* contained lists of alleged Jewish Bolsheviks. A brief summary of this list is contained on page 16 of *The Hand That Signed The Paper* - except that Nikolai Bukharin is wrongly named as being of Jewish background.

In *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime 1919-1924*, Richard Pipes traced the history of the *Protocols* from its anti-semitic origins in Russia circa 1902 to its ultimate conclusion as the rationalism for Adolf Hitler's war against the Jews:

Bolshevik outrages, and the open incitement to

world revolution by a regime in which Jews were highly visible, occurred at a time when Western opinion was looking for scapegoats. It became common after the war, especially among the middle classes and professional people, to identify Communism with a global Jewish conspiracy, and to interpret it as the realisation of the program presented in the *Protocols*. While common sense might balk at the proposition that Jews were responsible for both "supracapitalism" and its enemy, Communism, the dialectic of the *Protocols* was flexible enough to accommodate such contradictions. Since the ultimate objective of the Jews was said to be subverting the gentile world, they could act, depending on the circumstances, now as capitalists, now as Communists.

In *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* (1991) Robert S Wistrich acknowledged that after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution many of the "more literate, urbanised Jews" came to play a prominent role "in the apparatus of the Communist Party", in leading government posts and in other areas of public life. But, as Wistrich demonstrates, there was a downside:

There were, however, other features of Soviet