

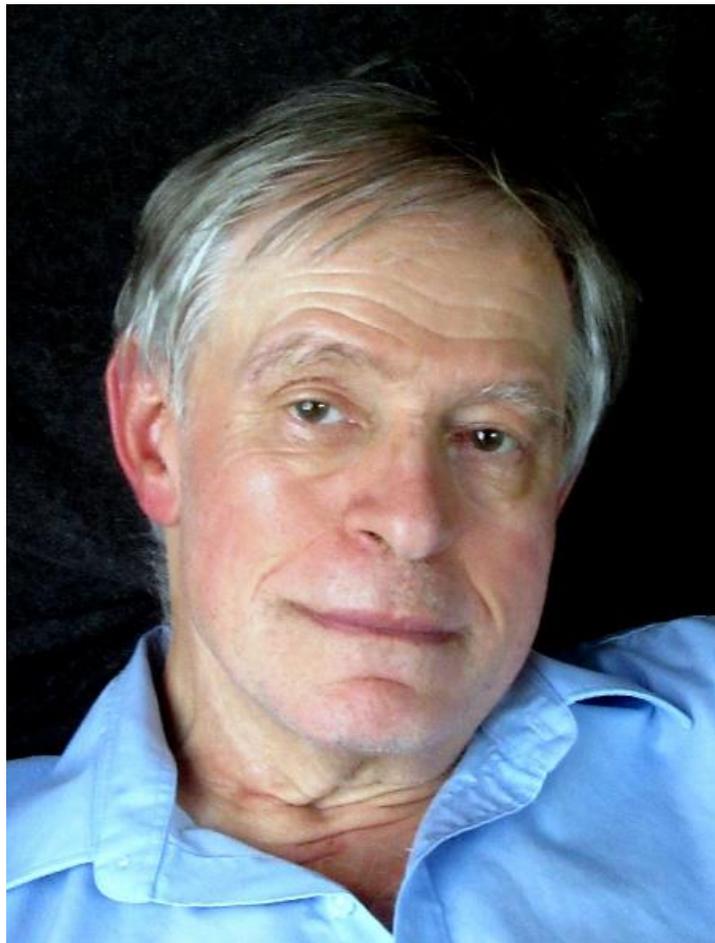
Passion, energy, and a love of languageⁱ

Alex Skovron

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Abstract. A biographical outline of the life, work and achievements of Dr Serge Liberman (1942–2017), noted author, editor, scholar and medical practitioner based in Melbourne, Australia.

Key Words: Australian Jewish writers, short stories, Melbourne, Judaica.



Serge Liberman in 2017 (courtesy Alex Skovron)

Serge Israel Liberman—author, editor, scholar, bibliographer and medical practitioner, a leading light in Australian Jewish literary and multicultural spheres for more than forty years—was born on 14 November 1942 in Fergana, Uzbekistan (USSR), to Abram Jacob and Regina Liberman (*née* Minski), who were Polish-born parents made refugees by the war in Europe. A daughter, also born in Fergana, died there in infancy before Serge was born. After spending time in a DP camp in Germany (1946–7) and then in Paris (1947–51), the family of three arrived by ship in Melbourne in 1951. Here, Serge learnt English, continued his education, graduated in Medicine from Melbourne University in 1967, and (after a period in Israel with his first wife Eva Matzner, where the eldest of their three children was born) began work in Melbourne in 1974 as a general practitioner, continuing until his retirement in 2013.

Alongside that career he pursued his literary vocation. Over some thirty years he published six collections of stories: *On Firmer Shores* (1981), *A Universe of Clowns* (1983), *The Life That I Have Led* (1986), *The Battered and the Redeemed* (1990), *Voices from the Corner* (2000) and *Where I Stand* (2008). During much of that time he laboured tirelessly on his ground-breaking *Bibliography of Australasian Judaica: 1788–2008*, the updated and expanded third edition of which appeared in 2011. At more than 800 pages, this is a towering work for which researchers and readers will be grateful for decades to come: a compendium of meticulously organized information on all publications concerned with Jewish life, literature, history, culture and the arts in Australia and New Zealand.

Liberman's published work, represented in numerous journals and anthologies in Australia and overseas, included editorials, translations, book reviews, and essays on historical, cultural, literary and communal topics. He was an editor of the *Melbourne Chronicle*, associate editor of the multicultural journal *Outrider*, literary editor of the *Australian Jewish News* and *Menorah*, vice-president of PEN Melbourne, and served on the editorial committees of the *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal* and *Gesher*, journal of the Council of Christians and Jews. For his short-story collections, he was three-times winner of the Alan Marshall Award and a recipient of the NSW Premier's Literary Award; three of the books were set as study texts in a number of Australian high schools and universities. In 2015 he was honoured with the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his contribution to Australian literature as an author, historian and scholar.

Serge and I became acquainted in the early 1980s, when I was starting to publish my own poetry after migrating from Sydney to Melbourne. I became aware of the local young Jewish doctor who was also a writer (or as Serge might have put it, a writer who happened to practise medicine); he had already brought out his first book and was making a name for himself. Inevitably our literary paths crossed and a firm friendship would develop. I was always struck, when reading his stories, by his passion and seriousness of purpose, his love of language, and his powerful sense of the interlocking of destinies. Then there was that kaleidoscopic procession of characters who populate his narratives. His fiction is distinctive for its vivid, highly-charged prose, its ethical, at times metaphysical intensity, and especially for its myriad protagonists drawn with colourful precision and a compassionate understanding of the highlights and shadows of the human spirit. The stories are thought-provoking, rich in penetrating insights, and often extremely moving.

Liberman's imagination was shaped by the world's great authors, dramatists, philosophers, artists and musicians; and perhaps even more so by the greats of the Jewish and Yiddish literary traditions, which infused his writing. His strong Jewish identity, and his history as a child survivor of the Holocaust growing up in an atmosphere darkened by a backdrop of devastation and loss, underpin many of the themes woven through the pages of his books. And while the Jewish experience, in its many guises, would remain his work's centre of gravity, he regarded his stories as universal in their exploration of the elements and enigmas of our common humanity.

Serge Liberman was a kind, courteous, softly-spoken individual, and a thoughtful, loyal and generous friend. Forever excited by ideas, he relished good conversation and was always willing to question, to seek out, discover, engage. Serious and studious, he could sport a correspondingly understated wit, while his humour could display an absurd, even wicked streak.

He was a person of supreme dedication and immense energy – which he needed, in order to combine his creative, professional and voluntary work with a thriving full-time medical practice. As a doctor, he was revered by his patients for his unstinting devotion and personal concern for their welfare. By nature a modest and humble man, Serge gave of himself freely and generously. The bulk of his editorial and scholarly work was done on a voluntary basis, with no expectation of financial reward. He played a significant role in fostering Australian Jewish writing, not only through the publications he was involved with but frequently in less visible capacities. I know I speak not just for myself but for many other writers, young and not so young, who were the beneficiaries of his encouragement and support.

Confronted in 2016 with a diagnosis of motor neurone disease, Serge the medical professional fully understood its ineluctable trajectory; as a committed rationalist, however, he eschewed the consolation of any thought of an afterlife. Throughout his illness he maintained an extraordinary outward demeanour: his characteristic ready smile, expressed by the merest crease around the lips, could warm the heart and lift the mood of any visitor who chanced to offer a joke or ironic aside. His dignity and grace in the face of his unspeakable predicament were an inspiration.

Serge was looking forward to the publication of his final book, a selection of nearly thirty of some of his finest stories, under the title *The Storyteller*. He took an active role in choosing the stories and discussing editorial and other aspects of the project, including the cover. On one occasion he asked me what would happen if he died before the book came out. I replied 'Don't!' – and added that it would be vastly preferable to launch the book before we launched *him* into eternity; to which he offered up one of those endearing little smiles. However, it was not to be: *The Storyteller* did not make its appearance until a few months later, and Serge did not live to see the finished book. He died on 22 December 2017, aged seventy-five.

Serge Liberman's staunch integrity, his caring, compassionate nature and his profound humanity were a hallmark not only of his work and his writing, but of the life that he led, and of the way he led it. He is survived by Anna Mow, his devoted second wife of more than twenty years, three children, two stepchildren, and six grandchildren.

THE X OF HIS OFFENCE

for Serge Liberman

A woman sits half-naked on the parapet
her posture amphibious

From the left the sand would rise to claim her
softly, irreversibly
if she remained here
within the scrutines of a timelapse camera
long enough, and we too stayed together
for the required epoch, she, we,
the machine

To the right
the footpath is trodden excessively
in the habit of footpaths
by slippery shadows
by shadowy faces
by careless limbs otherwise
known as life

The photographer vanishes, he was
never here, the feet pass
the girl's not unsuggestive position
reminiscent of glossy rock loreleis
with barely a snigger, or a leer
might escape the gap
of the odd truculent flâneur headed for cities

These are skylined against the remote
past or suspected future,
but the beyond clouds
could unveil very eternity if just
that cinematographer could discard his cable
come back to the x of his offence
his innocent lack of guiltlessness

Where the naked woman now is lacked as well
by the eroding parapet

Bio note: Alex Skovron was born in Poland, lived briefly in Israel, and emigrated to Australia aged nearly ten. His family settled in Sydney, where he grew up and completed his studies. From the early 1970s he worked as an editor for book publishers in Sydney and (after 1980) Melbourne. His poetry has appeared widely in Australia and overseas, and he has received a number of major awards for his work. The most recent of his six poetry collections, *Towards the Equator: New & Selected Poems* (2014), was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Alex's collection of short stories, *The Man who Took to his Bed*, was published in 2017. His novella, *The Poet* (2005), has been translated into Czech under the title *Básník* (2014). *The Attic*, a selection of his poetry translated into French, was published in 2013; and a bilingual volume of Chinese translations, *Water Music*, appeared in 2017. The many public readings he has given have included appearances in China, Serbia, India, Ireland, Macedonia and Portugal.

ⁱ This is a modified version of the obituary that was published in the Australian press. Its author, Alex Skovron, a longstanding friend of Serge Liberman, is a Melbourne writer and editor. He and Richard Freadman edited Serge's last book, *The Storyteller: Selected Stories*, published in April 2018 by Hybrid Publishers, Melbourne.