

THE BIBLIOMANIACS

By J. Halper

Whenever the famous writer Hanan Meir walks into my store for his monthly visit, he heads directly towards the “M” section of Hebrew literature in search of books that he himself has written. Now struggling to produce the best-sellers like those he’d done in the 1970’s and ‘80’s, he usually finds a good half-shelf full, proving that he is still “out there” on the market, for used book-buyers at least. His satisfaction is only tempered by the disappointment of not receiving any royalty payments from their sales. He willfully ignores the question of *why* so many of his books are to be found in used bookstores and why these are not treasured, permanent fixtures on his reader’s shelves. But he has been around for a long time and assumes that people are simply reading much less these days. It surely has nothing to do with his writing.

Meir moves on to the next annoying challenge, discovering books that he inscribed or dedicated to somebody. He signed a lot of books in his heyday when he was a permanent, accessible fixture at Israel’s book fairs. When he does discover a signed book, which happens often, his initial feeling of elation dissolves into righteous indignation.

“Who sold this to you?” he’d demand....” I don’t recall a Mrs. Goldfarb...Did she pass away? Did her heirs sell this to you?”

I don’t recall when or how I got the book, but even if I did, I wouldn’t reveal it. I protect my source.

“It just kind of came in with a pile of books”, I’d say, “I...I have no recollection of who brought it.”

Then Meir would pass his hand over the bald spot where his kippah once rested uneasily. After the Rabin assassination he demonstratively removed it, taking this one opportunity to finally ditch the symbol which had permanently pigeon-holed him as a religious- Zionist outsider in the elite world of Tel Aviv's secular writers.

Satisfied that Mrs. Goldfarb was dead, Hanan Meir would then ask me for any gossip I may have picked up since his last visit. One hears a lot of stories in a place where stories are sold. I am often a good listener, and encourage people, especially paying customers. Stories of bibliomania, the obsessive-compulsive urge to hoard books, intrigued him. Meir's personal library was said to top 15,000 books, so it must have soothed him to hear that he wasn't the only obsessive meshuggener hoarder.

One day I told him that I had a juicy story about a real live bibliomaniac. But no names. Meir slowly rested his wide girth on a shaky stool facing my desk. "I'm listening", he said.

"It was already dark, maybe a half-hour before closing, when this person, let's call him "The Professor", checked in for his bi-weekly visit. He collects material on a very specific topic..."

"Oh?"

"Literature from the British Mandate-Palestine period, early Israel and early Tel Aviv. It is a growing collectible field."

"Hmm, yes I know."

"The bibliophile in question was a renowned expert in this field as well as a CEO of a large high-tech company. Despite being a very busy man, he found time to lecture and appear on television discussing the cafes, bars and music of early Tel Aviv. He had amassed hundreds if not thousands of books in this field. He looked the part of a professor.

“He was never seen without a bespoke English tweed jacket and tie. He had the requisite grave, black-framed glasses and an unruly lock of peppery, black hair. This was the image of a serious intellectual engaged in his serious hobby. In short, he was a well-known man of status, means and some media fame. I think that he may even have been awarded the Israel Prize for his historical research.”

“Yosef, so?” Said Meir “What’s your story? What did the professor do?”

“At first, nothing. I gave him free rein of my shop, like I do with you. I allowed him to browse the special volumes behind my desk. I trusted him implicitly. He was a good, well-paying and reliable customer, so one evening I took the opportunity of his presence to take a little break and get some pizza. I had been alone for hours that day and hungry. The Professor nodded absent-mindedly and said, “Sure, no problem”.

“I see where this is leading”, Meir said fidgeting in anticipation on the uncomfortable stool.

“When I got back from the break, maybe ten minutes later, I found the store was empty. I ran through my little maze of aisles, but no sign of The Professor. I felt a knot in my stomach. The garlicky acid from the pizza bubbled up my throat as I doubled back to my cash register. There wasn’t much in there to begin with, but thank God, it hadn’t been pilfered.

“Where was the Professor? And had he left? There must have been a miscommunication I thought, as I stepped outside and looked down the alley. There I caught sight of somebody moving about in the dark shadows thirty feet away. It was him. He was placing something behind the low wall separating my property from the empty office building behind. Something told me to approach cautiously, silently, but I accidentally stepped on broken glass. He froze in place, then hurried off to the far side of the building and out to the street. He was gone.

“I walked over to the wall and looked into the courtyard. There, I found an entire box of collectible books. I was very angry but intrigued. How was he planning to get into the locked courtyard? Could a seventy-year-old man scale a chain-link fence, throw the heavy box back over and get away?

“I called my neighbor from the dress shop to watch my store as I waited for The Professor in the shadows. Ten minutes later he reappeared in the neighboring yard, stealthily approaching the box when I called out to him, but he froze in his tracks, hiding in the shadow of a tree.

““Hey! Professor! I see you there, behind the tree! Come out and tell me what you are up to! We can discuss this amicably.’

“But the Professor, a veteran of three Israeli wars did not budge nor make a sound.

““Okay Professor,’ I said, So you wanna be a baby. I am taking my books back to the store. When you find the nerve, come in here and explain why you were trying to steal my books.

“He reappeared fifteen minutes later with black rust smudged across his damp forehead. A sleeve was torn and there was a small, dried leaf stuck in his hair. He looked pathetic. He inspired more sympathy now than anger.

“He said, ‘I was behind your desk, perusing your shelves, when I spotted a rival collector enter the shop. I was afraid he would get to the books I needed. So I hid them out back. I had every intention of coming back to pay you.’

““Professor, with all due respect, a small child can make up a better whopper than that. Do you take me for a total idiot?’

“Now I was afraid that I would get physical with him. Maybe that’s what he wanted, to turn himself into the victim and have me arrested instead of him! ‘I would like you to leave at once and not come back here again. Ever.’

“Outside of calling the police, this was the worst punishment I could think of. It was like cutting a junkie off from his supply of drugs. I preferred not to speculate on how many books he had stolen from me over the years. I was just happy to have staunched this leakage.”

Meir scratched his bald spot. “Is that it? The whole story?”

“Well, he did come back around six months later and apologized. We shook hands and he browsed around a bit, with me tailing him the entire time. Then it occurred to me why he always wore that tweed jacket even in summer. It camouflaged him with a veneer of respectability while its many pockets were the perfect place to stuff books.

“Inquiries with other book dealers in Tel Aviv confirmed similar behavior. But because of his status, nobody ever complained to the police. I did hear that he and a friend, a former general and cabinet minister, used to go around libraries, bookstores and monasteries in Europe, stealing books.”

Meir said, “I think I know who you mean. Who is it? I swear that I won’t tell anybody. I have to know.”

What the hell, I was the wounded party. Why protect the Professor? But my condition for telling the story was that it remain anonymous. Meir’s eyes were the fierce and unyielding eyes of an obsessive bibliomaniac. It was far more important for him to know than for me to keep it under my hat. So I relented. I told him.

He was incredulous.

“It can’t be,” he said. “The Professor is a close friend. You must be confusing him with someone else!”

“I didn’t want to tell you who it was, but you twisted my arm! If you don’t want to believe me, that’s your problem. I am sorry I told you.”

The author lifted his heavy load from the stool and headed for the door. He didn’t say goodbye...or thank you. I was sure that I had lost him, another good and influential customer in the bargain.

But Meir was back a few weeks later, going through the same ritual search for his own signed and inscribed books. We remained cordial but not so close as before. I didn’t bother telling him any more book-gossip though and we never brought up the Professor again.

About a year later Hanan Meir made his usual visit to my store. This time he did not make a beeline toward the books he authored. He looked me straight in the eye and said that he owed me an apology.

“An apology? For what?” Although I had an inkling.

“That story about the Professor? I didn’t believe you. I thought you were lying. I was wrong and I’m sorry.”

“Why? What happened? You caught him stealing a few books from you?”

Meir shook his head. “Last night I was at a party. He was there. The conversation shifted to the book called *A Gentle Madness*, by Nicholas Brianes.”

“I know the book”. I said, “The one about obsessive-compulsive Bibliomaniacs who do some crazy stuff to get a hold of books.”

Meir nodded slowly. “Even I suffer from it a bit. But the Professor said something that made me shudder...and think of you.”

“What”

“Murder,” he said. “I would even murder to get a book that I must have. Yes, I would kill for books.”

It took a second or two for this to sink in. Tales of the Professor’s early years as an infantry officer I already knew, but this information jolted a vague memory of something whispered to me long ago, his murky years of “government service,” in Europe, a euphemism for Mossad agent.

Meir locked his eyes onto mine with a long meaningful stare.

“You are a lucky man, Yosef.”

It was nice he believed me—but clearly, he didn't understand what luck was.

J. C. Halper was born and raised in the suburbs of Newark, NJ. Since 1983 he has lived in Israel. He owns and operates Halper’s Bookstore in Tel Aviv since 1991.