IN MEMORIAM

ADY ASSABI

born 29 March 1947 Tel Aviv, Israel, died Netanya, Israel 15 June 2003, aged 56

When George Steiner accepted the Börne Prize in May in Frankfurt, he gave a vivid picture of the Jew as a guest, a wandering voice of conscience in today's world:

I am convinced that this quasi-absurd survival and the continuance of living on of the Jews has a meaning...Because the Jew was always driven away, because he was nowhere at home, because his only true home was a text: the Torah, the Jew *per definitionem* is a guest upon this earth, a guest among all the people. It is his task to serve humanity as an example, as a model of this situation.

As a rabbi, Ady Assabi lived in the Bible. It was his homeland and, born in Israel, it was his language. Why, then, did he wander through the world, driven from land to land? Perhaps it was his family heritage. He was the last of a family very much involved in the life of German Jewry. Much of his family did not survive the Holocaust. His grandmother, aunt, and other members of the family died in the death camps. His father had moved to Israel, where Ady was born. He was shocked when his father returned to Germany after Ady's fourteenth birthday. Rebellng against that decision, he moved back to Israel and attended school there.

Something brought him back to Germany, to study. He wanted to be a witness, to speak to the few Jews, the many Germans. Throughout his life, he possessed an almost childlike innocence, blending a powerful charismatic personality with the awareness of being an outsider. He believed in the possibility of change within others, within a world which would not accept him on his own terms. He made too many demands upon that world and also upon himself.

When he came to London to study for the rabbinate at Leo Baeck College, he was its youngest student.

Viewed as 'a brand plucked from the fire', Ady Assabi was sent back to Germany after his ordination in 1971. Even as a student, his rabbinic work at the Middlesex New Synagogue in London (1969–71) had convinced teenagers

to strive for the rabbinate (Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain still thinks of him as an abiding influence in his life). And he became a guest in a world that was not ready for his sometimes discordant message.

Ady had felt a sense of obligation to return to the Jewish community in Germany. It proved too difficult for his fiery temper. Nevertheless, as the *Landesrabbiner* of Nordrhein-Westfalen, he served seven small congregations until he and his wife Yael could return to Israel. Yael, a beautiful and exceptional woman, had a career as an attorney in Israel. They had two sons. She died of cancer, still young, and Ady visited Israel every year for her annual memorial prayers. In Israel, he also became active within radical politics, but did not succeed in becoming a major figure within a party.

His wanderings continued, and he went to South Africa where, once again, he played a charismatic, often controversial role as the rabbi of a community under siege in that troubled land. In the process, he first enlarged and then divided the Reform community. The Shalom Independent Synagogue still uses his prayerbook, *Chadesh Yamenu*, which he wrote in 1995. Involved in human rights and also arrested, he met Nelson Mandela, which again emphasised his opposition to the 'Establishment'. Again, torn between his various worlds, he decided to return to Berlin where his father had been a bar mitzvah in the Rykestrasse Synagogue. It was a renewed assertion of his German roots. His new Israeli partner was Shoshana Breiner, a gifted artist. They built a house in Israel, but he still remained a guest and wanderer. Again, Germany could not be his home. Already ill with a brain tumour and undergoing radiation therapy, Assabi forced himself to serve as a Liberal rabbi within the Berlin Oranienburger Synagogue. Again, he felt himself more at home within the alternate, dissident section of that community. Now, in his terminal days, he did receive respect from the community. Yet there were final tasks for him. He returned to Israel, in search of an old age home for his aged father. And there he died, still a troublesome guest in the eyes of the traditional establishment, but a legend to those who had come to see the hidden aspects of greatness. Rabbi Assabi participated in the writings of liturgies within the various communities in which he served, and he had almost completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the topic of Judaism and thanatology. However, it is likely that his true impact will be as a troubled, wandering and often lonely voice in the world. He made those he encountered uncomfortable and could turn a community from friends into enemies – in part because they could not follow his visions. Assabi never changed.

During his address in St Paul's Church in Frankfurt, George Steiner reminded his German audience that

The Baal Shem, the founder and master of Hasidism, was right when he taught that 'Truth is always in exile, that the Truth must continually wander on'. It is the duty of the Jew to fight against the barbarism of nation-

alism, against chauvinism, against racial persecution. It is the duty of the Jew to prove that it is interesting to live anywhere in this world, to work and, above all, to learn.

Rabbi Assabi always quested after his own truth. And so he was an unwelcome guest in his worlds.

Albert H. Friedlander