Rabbi Andre Ungar z'l

(21 July 1929–5 May 2020)

Jonathan Magonet

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Rabbi Ungar was born in Budapest to Bela and Frederika Ungar. The family lived in hiding with false identity papers from 1944 under the German occupation.¹ After the war, a scholarship brought him to the UK where he studied at Jews' College, then part of University College, and subsequently studied philosophy. Feeling uncomfortable within Orthodoxy, he met with Rabbi Harold Reinhart and Rabbi Leo Baeck and eventually became an assistant rabbi at West London Synagogue. In 1954 he obtained his doctorate in philosophy and was ordained as a rabbi through a programme that preceded the formal creation of Leo Baeck College in 1956. In 1955 he was appointed as rabbi at the progressive congregation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Very soon his fiery anti-Apartheid sermons were condemned in the Afrikaans newspapers and received mixed reactions from the Jewish community. In December 1956 he was served with a deportation order and was forced to leave the country.

He wrote with passion about his South African experience some ten years later in the book *Resistance against Tyranny*² A symposium edited by his friend and fellow Hungarian Eugene Heimler whose important account of his Holocaust experience *Night of the Mist* Ungar had translated into English.

I found that our own genteel white leisure and wealth was a thin veneer over a vast mass of coloured suffering; and that the distinction was artificially created, maintained and, since the Nationalist victory of 1948, deliberately worsened day after day.

A welter of sentiments surged within me as I gradually learned this. I was bitterly ashamed that I had come to Africa at all: I ought to have known, I should not have fallen victim to too cunning enticement and, worse still, to my own greed and ambition and vanity. I was pained as I contemplated my own new neighbours and friends: they were hypocrites, or 'schizophrenics' – so much gentleness and kindness toward me

and to one another and such callous uncaring towards the majority of their own country-men?

There was also a strand of sentiment that shamed me most of all. One part of my being rejoiced at what I saw. I delighted in being part of an aristocracy, a privileged elite. Back in Hungary I had, as a child, often wondered with envy what it would have felt like to be born the son of a Baron: rich, gentile, a silver spoon in my mouth. Well, here I suddenly found I had it all. Without any effort of my own, I was granted membership in a most select club. And, yes, in a way I liked it, and found it perfectly right. So it must be, I caught something inside me preen, it is the divine and natural order of things. It gave a sense of security, of reassurance, of noble elevation....

And another part of myself feared for my sanity and decency at the realisation of such sentiments. Idiot, I kept telling myself, by this stand of selection every white-skinned cretin, Nazi, criminal is your fellow-aristocrat. I squirmed at the thought of that company. Besides, it demanded no effort at all. The worth of my degrees, I reflected, could be measured by the sum total of time and effort I invested in their acquisition. All my student years I mumbled dark contemptuous dismissals at honorary degrees and their holders. To be given privilege simply on account of my pale epidermis was, ultimately, an insult to me. It seemed to imply: the only excellence I can claim is the colour of my skin ... nothing of the mind or soul or person ...

But perhaps most powerfully throbbing in me was the instinctive analogy between European Hitlerism and South African apartheid....

My own speeches and articles in this field were, I hope I am honest in believing, at least in part motivated by my Jewish identity. The whole ethical legacy of Bible and Talmud militate on the side of human equality and inter-relatedness; I consider it my rabbinic obligation to clarify this legacy and to advocate the concrete application of it in the social setting of the time and place. In addition, the historic experience of Jewish ethnic encounters became relevant to invoke in South Africa. Most South African Jews are second-generation citizens, children of refugees from persecution in Tzarist Russia. A notable segment came fleeing from Hitler's New Order in Europe in the '30s and '40s. I was shocked into vivid memories of the racial branding, ghetto building and deportation of my native Hungary during the Second World War when I witnessed the same techniques, based on similar sentiments, applied against non-white South Africans. Thus both the religious and the historic dimensions of being a Jew were active in whatever opposition a few of us manifested to South African Nationalist rule.³

He returned to the UK, serving as rabbi at the St. Georges Settlement Synagogue. He moved to the United States and became associate rabbi at Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark, from 1959 to 1961, working with

Rabbi Joachim Prinz, famous for his support of civil rights. Rabbi Ungar found himself more comfortable within the American Conservative movement than Reform and joined the Rabbinic Assembly. He was one of nineteen members of the Assembly who volunteered to go as a delegation to Birmingham, Alabama to join Martin Luther King. He records the experience in detail in 'To Birmingham, and Back' (*Conservative Judaism* 18, no. 1 [Fall 1963], 1–17). When it was time to serve his own congregation, he accepted an offer at Temple Emanuel, then in Westwood, subsequently relocated to become Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley in Woodcliff Lake, where he served for forty-four years until his retirement, remaining as rabbi emeritus until his death.

His poetic translations of the Amidah have appeared in various editions of the Conservative *Siddur Sim Shalom*. He was a supporter of equal roles for women in congregational life at a time in the 1970s when many Conservative rabbis merely 'tolerated' the term egalitarian. An obituary in the *New York Times* notes that Rabbi Ungar 'visited Israel more than 150 times and loved traveling worldwide. He was a big fan of Yehudah Amichai's poetry, Kant, Bach, reading, crossword puzzles, movies (good and bad), and pizza'.⁴

He is survived by his wife Judy, four children and seventeen grandchildren.

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Notes

1. Details of the experience can be found in a long and detailed interview about his life and career by Joanne Palmer published in the *Jewish Standard* newspaper on 30 May 2014 (<https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/from-budapest-to-woodcliff-lake/>).
2. *Resistance Against Tyranny: A Symposium*, edited by Eugene Heimler (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), 25–61.
3. *Ibid.*, 29–30, 35.
4. Full obituary available at <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?n=andre-ungar&pid=196152686&fhid=17135>.