

## The Lesson by Jack Hoffmann



Two old friends sit hunched over a table in Pretoria, South Africa, a city of jacaranda trees and checkered history.

*Alef... bet... gimmel*

Isadore enunciates the words slowly and clearly to his new pupil, Jaap.

It's Jaap's first Hebrew lesson, an adventure he had long dreamed of, but he had lacked the courage to undertake it, until now.

Jaap contemplates the Hebrew letters which are at the same time both familiar and obscure.

He hears the alien sounds.

He watches Isadore's pointing finger as it courses across the page from right to left.

Memories flood.

Isadore is 86 years old. Jaap is 88.

*daled... hay... vav*

In a neighbouring city in the '50s, Isadore taught a class of teenagers history and English. I was one of them.

His colleagues called him Issy or Isadore. We addressed him as Sir or Mr Kahanovitz but amongst us, he was known fondly as Kahny.

His characteristic stance in the classroom was leaning with his back against the blackboard, one leg raised 90 degrees and resting upon the desk in front of him.

Amorphous chalk ellipses and asymmetric circles on the blackboard represented states and continents, realms and kingdoms, empires and hegemons. And in the upper left-hand corner, was a triangle that was forever England. Exes represented generals and armies. Arrows were points of confrontation. Asterisks showed victories. By the end of the lesson the board was an incoherent plexus of curlicues, whirligigs and squiggles. But out of this chaos, blossomed our understanding and love of History. Emblazoned on our memories a half a century later,

are the achievements of Guttenberg and Caxton, Calvin and Luther, Rousseau and Voltaire, Napoleon and Metternich, Bismarck and Garibaldi.

Scheduled English lessons were occasionally usurped by Kahny's asking the question "What are you reading?"

Those who were not reading anything, sought invisibility behind their downcast eyes or the lids of their desks. Those who answered Hemmingway or Flaubert or Dostoyevsky, received nods of approval, words of discussion. Those who admitted L'Amour or Spillane were neither mocked nor belittled. They were gently ribbed and with a wry smile, encouraged to set their literary goals a tad higher.

He opened our eyes to the joys of reading.

*ani lomed..... at lomedet*

Jaap van Proosdij had not always been a South African and had never been a Jew. He was born in Holland.

When the Nazis occupied his country, he was a newly fledged lawyer. He was seconded to the service of the German Administrator and worked in the *Reichskommissariat* in the section which dealt with doubtful racial issues.

This seemingly banal task placed into Jaap's hand, a key to life or death. For this was the section which unraveled the complexities of the Nazi race laws, solved the conundrums of who was Aryan and who a Jew.

Such an office was indeed needed, as these laws were elaborate and tortuous. According to the convoluted guidelines, there were various categories and nuances of Jewishness: One with only one Jewish grandparent was a *mischling* of the second degree and might escape deportation and death. If one had two Jewish and two non-Jewish grandparents, one was classified as a first degree *mischling* and might not be immediately deported. Three Jewish grandparents meant incontestably that one was a Jew and deportation was imminent. If a Jewish mother could prove that her child was the product of illicit cohabitation with an Aryan, the child was classified second degree. If one could prove that one was born a Christian and that one's Jewish parents were parents only by adoption, one could be upgraded to Aryan status.

Lawyers are trained to uphold the law and to respect the sanctity of facts. Jaap soon realized that spurning evil laws and distorting facts could save lives.

Jaap found that he had the power to declassify, reclassify, upgrade. By ruse and subterfuge, he could dilute polluted genes. He could convert Jew to Aryan, *Untermensch* to *Übermensch*. Strokes of a pen could falsify baptismal papers, smudges of ink could obscure birth certificates, false rubber stamps could amend marriage documents, adoption records could be forged. If nothing better could be done, assessment of cases could be long delayed by mislaying papers in the bureaucratic labyrinth.

Jaap was a benign Cerberus who helped souls to escape from Hell.

But when would "They" notice the patina on his brow, the thundering at his temple? When would the Eagle swoop?

*lamadeti ..... lamadnu*

Isadore, long retired from his career as a schoolteacher and headmaster, still teaches the underprivileged (and the somewhat less underprivileged: He once taught English to a group of Libyan diplomats) and advises universities and other bodies on pedagogy.

A gentle man who burnished young minds.  
He spared the rod and did not spoil the child.

Jaap emigrated to South Africa in the 50s and became a successful lawyer. He is a committed Zionist and has visited Israel several times. He never misses the Holocaust Memorial Service and was a regular speaker on the Holocaust until a year or two ago.

In 1988, he was honoured with Yad Vashem's "The Righteous Among the Nations" award. A brave man who saved faceless souls. Two old friends bound together by tendrils of history, sit hunched over a table braving the ancient tongue.

*elmod ..... nilmod*

The lesson continues.....

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**Footnotes:**

This article was written in 2010 and was published in The Jerusalem Report.

The illustration was done by Avi Katz

Jaap van Proosdij died in 2011, three months short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Isidore Kahanovitz died in 2021 at the age of 98.

Their memories are blessed.



**Isidore Kahanovitz**  
1923-2021  
Photographed in 1959



**Jaap van Proosdij**  
1922-2011