



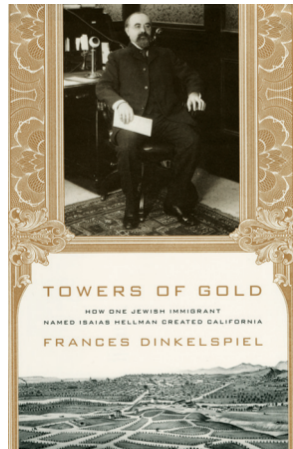
Tales of Resilience and Initiative

Jewish wit shines in Angel Wagenstein’s tragicomic novel about twentieth-century Europe... Isaias Hellman’s magnificent career in post-Gold Rush California... **by Bonny V. Fetterman**

Isaac’s Torah: A Novel Concerning the Life of Isaac Jacob Blumenfeld Through Two World Wars, Three Concentration Camps, and Five Motherlands by Angel Wagenstein, trans. from Bulgarian by Elizabeth Frank and Deliana Simeonova

(Hansel Books, 306 pp., \$23.95)

I was never interested in politics, just the opposite—politics was interested in me,” Isaac Jacob Blumenthal, the hero of *Isaac’s Torah*, explains to the author. “I was born... in the wonderful town of Kolodetz by Drogobych, and grew up as a faithful subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire... Later on, without leaving my home town of



Jewish habit, I’m making a detour from the story, taking a short cut through Odessa to Berdichev...”) and opinions (“Even if you don’t ask me, I’ll still tell you—have you ever seen a Jew who can keep to himself what he’s already decided to say?”), delivered without self-pity but with pity

for others. His rabbi, Shmuel Ben-David, who also chairs the town’s Atheists’ Club under the Communists, loses his faith but not his compassion.

Kolodetz, Poland became my motherland...” Next came occupation by the Soviet Union, followed by the German Reich... The five books of Isaac’s “Torah” are his experiences under his successive “motherlands.”

Today, with the spiraling number of Holocaust novels dramatizing already dramatic events to the point of exploitation, this gentle novel stands out as an authentic masterpiece, recalling with bittersweet humor the deeply humane cultural ethos of East European Jews.

What makes this story of a Jewish tailor from Galicia unique is the Jewish style of narration which, like Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye, never fails to point out the absurdity of a situation with ironic Jewish humor (“Excuse me, please, for starting with a *khokhma*, you know, a Hasidic fable that’s not even funny—but maybe with some effort you’ll figure out the moral”). As Bulgarian author and screenwriter Angel Wagenstein, himself a camp survivor and partisan fighter, writes in the acknowledgments: “My people have turned laughter into a defensive shield and a source of courage and self-esteem through the most tragic moments of their existence.”

Towers of God: How One Jewish Immigrant Named Isaias Hellman Created California by Frances Dinkelspiel

(St. Martin’s Press, 376 pp., \$29.95)

It seems odd that few remember the name of Isaias Hellman (1842–1920), considering the role he played as an investment banker in building up two great California cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco. When Los Angeles was still a frontier gold rush town, Hellman, a Jewish immigrant from Germany, founded its first successful bank, the Farmers and Merchants Bank; later, he transformed the Wells Fargo Bank in

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The events of Isaac’s life are tragic—he is drafted under each regime, loses his beloved wife and children in the Holocaust, and winds up in a Soviet gulag in Siberia after the war. Through it all, he is an acute observer of human character and never stops looking for meaning in this senseless history. Isaac’s monologue is full of digressions (“Following an old

Bonny V. Fetterman is literary editor of Reform Judaism magazine.

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