

Melbourne as a hell-on-earth

SERGE Liberman is a visionary — a Melbourne amalgam of Bunyan, Blake and Wordsworth, with a trace of Joseph Furphy.

He sits squarely in the tradition of the citizen moralist, casting a judgmental, prophetic eye around him as he struggles to come to terms with the Australia he knows as a Russian Jewish immigrant; and this collection of short stories is essential reading for anybody interested in understanding this aspect of Australia.

The stories are partly autobiographical; the persona is often a doctor weighed down by a morbid X-ray vision of the pointlessness of human effort, or a poet or writer, wandering through each chartered street to note the marks of weakness and woe, or struggling to separate questions of fame from questions of fulfilment.

He is often an Australian Jew, discovering his place in a world-wide religion and, always, living under the shadow of Auschwitz. He is often beset by questions of salvation — is it to be through the excellence of European high culture, the "great" artists and thinkers, or is it material success in Australia?

Many of the stories operate a lively moral allegory; characters have names like Dr Balsam, Willy Welcare,

THE LIFE THAT I HAVE LED by
Serge Liberman; *Fine-lit*, \$12.95

DAVID ENGLISH

Mr Fowler, Charlie Chilvers, Chrissie Chrysalis. In fact Chrissie Chrysalis, along with thousands of others, meets a grim end in the haunting story, *The Poet Walks Along High Street*.

There are many references to the Holocaust in these stories, but in this case Liberman puts that particular hell-on-earth into a fabled but all too familiar Melbourne bayside suburb, showing how a totalitarian state can rely on the reassuring familiarity of place and purpose to enlist a population in its own destruction.

Cracow could just as easily have been Melbourne. Elimination of Jews could just as easily have been elimination of any Australian minority. Familiarity and memory are important aspects of a sense of belonging. In writing about his own suburbs, naming his own streets, describing his own experiences, Liberman is acting for all Jewish immigrants and taking

possession of their part of Melbourne, and their place in Australia.

It was obviously the young Serge Liberman, and not simply a character in his story, who enjoyed summer afternoons down at the beach, at "Little Jerusalem . . . that stretch of magnetic green between the kiosks, the St Kilda marina to the left, the South Pacific baths to the right".

Liberman writes mainly in an expressionistic style which seems to presuppose that plain speaking is not creative. He does not create character or rely on dramatic character interaction.

The resultant verbal effect is sometimes distracting. For example, *The Sniper*, ostensibly a narrative by a would-be assassin, feels uncomfortably like the testament of a frustrated writer embittered by the ineffectualism of his single voice, and planning wholesale revenge on his enemies. But at its best, Liberman's expressionism is very reminiscent of Wordsworth in *The Prelude* — the conversational and insistent inversions become a background for the powerful and surprising surges of emotion in the foreground.

In *The Survivors*, the narrator has escaped a domestic argument between his parents and is wandering

around St Kilda when he collides with further reminders of the fallen world, in the form of "vernacular and argot . . . even at the height of domestic squall within our walls unheard."

This leads him into an extraordinary 29-line peroration on the inadequacy of popular culture, the evils of bacchic oblivion and the loss of "all that might have been, of all that might yet have come of my father's one-time industrious venturesome spirit, or of my mother's artistic eye and hand to nothing lasting turned."

Liberman's is a singular voice, demanding to be heard on its own terms. Like many of his fellow immigrant artists he is recolonising the language, the landscape and the culture, and asserting a right on possession.

As one of his characters puts it, "To live in history is to take risks. And not to take risks, for a Jew, for us not to live in America, South Africa, Jerusalem, Europe or even Australia is to be taken out of history, out of the world, and to disown not just safety, but . . . to yield to stagnation, and by stagnation, to disown life."

Serge Liberman has not disowned life, nor is he frightened of taking risks.