

How a seemingly ordinary individual can play an extraordinary role

Book review by Philip K. Jason, Special to *The Jewish News*

The Old Stories by David Selcer. Biblio Publishing. 234 pages. Trade paperback \$12.95.

It's hard to separate the strands of memoir, history, biography and imagination in David Selcer's provocative, informative and deeply moving book. Perhaps the genre doesn't matter that much. It's a feast of information and revelation, past and present, satisfaction and regret.



Phil Jason

As the 19th century came to a close in the town of Kherson within the Ukrainian province of Greater Russia, a young boy – not at all a scholar – toiled with his lessons at the Great Choral Synagogue. He hated his studies, but enjoyed paging through the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the great Jewish storyteller whose Yiddish tales offered humor and profundity. At nine, Chaim Zelig could not absorb the great teachings of the Torah and the Talmud. He had a practical turn of mind. At a young age, he was happy enough to please his father and uncle by becoming a skilled metal worker. But he stumbled through his Bar Mitzvah preparation.

Chaim did honor the traditional goal of the *Tzadik* – of becoming a righteous man.

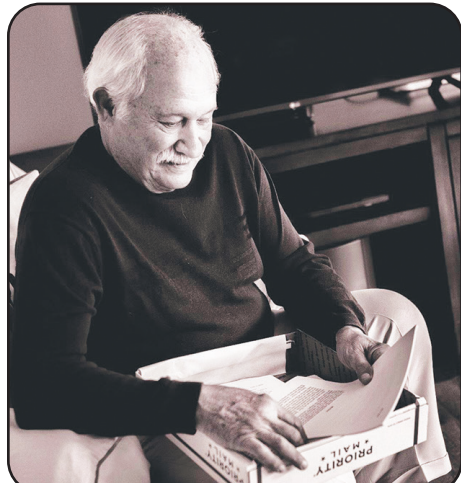
His older brother, Shmuel, was on his way to becoming a famous cantor.

Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1905) prompted the teenage sailor (Chaim) to "go AWOL" to

Manchuria.

He made his way to the United States via Canada (where the immigration process changed the name to Selcer), and a fortunate arranged marriage provided the opportunity to raise a family and, with his wife, run a business. His children were often embarrassed by his accent, his foreign ways and a certain coarseness of manner.

No one expected that this man, in his middle years, would become a hero of sorts. Without explanation, soon after the close of WWII, Chaim (now long known as Hyman), became involved for about 18 months as a worker for the entities that would soon help bring forth the State of Israel. This man, who never had a birth certificate, somehow, with his sophisticated and well-connected Ohio friend Herschel Bloom, worked for the cooperating Jewish organizations that would change the history of the Middle East.



David Selcer

They were part of Aliya Bet, the secret organization that created a secret Jewish fleet for the purpose of facilitating Jewish immigration to Palestine, a crucial step toward undermining the

power of the British Mandate for Palestine, which favored other political outcomes for the remains of the former Ottoman Empire.

This part of the story is told, long after Hyman's death, by Bloom, who is questioned relentlessly by Hyman's younger son, Lester. Lester had been a resentful son growing up in the shadow of his older brother Ben, just like Chaim had grown up in the shadow of Shmuel. Lester never could please his father. He never received praise, encouragement or even useful answers to his questions. His understanding of his father is modified through hearing Bloom's narrative of courage and commitment.

This brief stretch of time within the overall narrative includes a romantic subplot in Hyman's relationship with an attractive woman, Leila, he meets on Kfar Giladi, a kibbutz that absorbed many newcomers to nascent Israel.

David Selcer's prose has an abundance of descriptive power. He is able to put his complexly drawn characters into vivid, realistic settings across the decades of his fable-like tale. The author is also able to set forth the historical issues and events with clarity and precision. Moving as well is his handling of the various characters' emotional ups and downs.

Is Lester, who is the novel's primary first-person narrator, actually David Selcer in disguise? It sometimes seems that way. But no. David Selcer is the son of Lester and thus the inventor of the needed fictional answers to the nar-



rative's questions that would otherwise go unanswered.

A former Ohioan, David Selcer now lives in Sarasota with his wife, where he decides employment cases for federal agencies as a Federal Agency Decision Writer. Always a buckeye, the Buckeye Barrister (lead character in Selcer's four-part mystery series) is an avid Ohio State University fan. His other book is the historical novel *Lincoln's Hat and the Tea Movement's Anger*.

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