



Sasha Abramsky. *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2014. 359 p. ill. ISBN 9781590178881. US \$27.95

This wondrously absorbing, eloquently written, well-researched memoir testifies to the remarkable life of Chimen Abramsky, an autodidact and bibliophile, left-wing intellectual, teacher, and polymath. Chimen ran a bookshop in London's East End and lived in a castle of books consisting largely of Marxist / socialist literature and Jewish history. His home served as an intellectual mecca which drew such thinkers as Isaiah Berlin, Eric Hobsbawm, Arthur Hertzberg, Salo Baron, and Shmuel Ettinger for academic debate and political discussion.

This complex family memoir is a grandson's loving tribute, a celebration of what Nicholas Basbanes calls the "gentle madness" that possessed his book-loving ancestor. The author shows how books created an intellectual scene, a sacred space, and a sanctuary. They provided structure for Chimen's world, shielding him from the chaos, anarchy, and fearsomeness of daily life (34). Book lovers will be entranced by this expertly told tale about the power and magic of books.

Although Chimen viewed religion as "the (Marxist) opiate of the masses," his love for intellectuality clearly traces itself back through his pious rabbinic ancestors and their reverence for texts and hermeneutics. The author writes, "Chimen was like the mythological students celebrated in yeshiva lore, who had become so adept at studying texts that one could stick a pin into a book and they would know, from seeing how far it had sunk in, what page the point was resting on and what text was on that page" (31). Chimen's father was Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky, author of *Chazon Yehezkel*, a commentary on the Tosefta, whose early parts were written in Siberia under hard labor, a punishment inflicted for the crime of "Judaizing." Yehezkel was "the Mozart of Torah," who "had attended every top yeshiva in the region (of Minsk) establishing for himself a reputation as a Talmudic wunderkind" (32). He passed his excellent memory on to his son. As Sander Gilman argues in *Smart Jews*, the centuries of Talmudic learning honed critical thinking and analytic skills that carried over into secular Jewish life. While Chimen, like Spinoza and Nietzsche, considered religion for the weak, it is noteworthy that he ran two sedarim a year and his wife never served unkosher food at home.

The narrative celebrates the dialectic between Athens (philosophy/Marxism) and Jerusalem (Judaism) in Chimen's soul. These opposed forces are harmonized in this marvelous chronicle by a grandson honoring his grandfather's intellectual virtue and unique personality.



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Chimen joined the Communist party when the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941 and became a leader in the party's National Jewish Committee. In 1958, when he recognized the atrocities committed by Stalin, he rejected Marxism and reinvented himself once more as a liberal humanist and manuscripts expert for Sotheby's.

This is highly recommended for historians of the old and new left, students of Jewish history, scholars of memoir, and educated lay people.

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