

Cours de Ph. Romanski

Albert and Michael Bienenstock grew sugar beet in a part of Hungary that in 1919 was redesignated Czechoslovakia. This act of cartographical tyranny had transformed Michael into an overnight Zionist and, inspired by a childish sense of adventure and the inflammatory writings of Chaim Herzog, he took a boat to Haifa in 1923, under a proud new name, Amos Golan. Golan, Michael had satisfied himself after extensive, and in Albert's view preposterous, researches into family history, was the Bienenstocks' true Israelite patronymic. Golan was a fit name for a man travelling to claim his homeland for his people.

"Sailing into trouble," said Albert, words with which he was later to mock himself.

Albert's own son was named Michael in honour of his foolish uncle, to the great consternation and scandal of Albert's cousins in Vienna. Tradition held it to be bad luck for members of the same family to share a given name. Albert was not a traditionalist. He had no religion, he had no real sense of Jewishness. He was a farmer and a horseman, closer to the anti-Semitic Magyars of the old Habsburg Empire than to the scholarly gabardine beetles of shtetl and city, who scuttled about the streets with their heads down, cravenly hugging the walls when the gentiles walked by, as if fearful of catching or perhaps transmitting some terrible disease.

As a young man in 1914, Albert had fought for his Emperor. Rigged up like a chocolate soldier in gleaming cuirass and nodding plume, Albert the Blue Hussar was among the first to charge the Serbian guns in the early weeks when the Great War was a small Balkan affair that nobody believed could matter. Later, the proud troops of horses humbled by the titanic ordnance of the twentieth century, Albert was appointed to their reassignment as no more than drays and dispatch ponies, pulling with lowered heads the carriages and ambulances that shuffled behind the lines in the frozen Carpathian mountains or relaying fatuous messages between staff and field. With ironic resignation he told himself that loyalty to a great

moustache in Vienna was no more stupid than loyalty to a great beard in Jerusalem. By the end, however, he had seen too many white worms crawling in the eye-sockets of too many dead comrades, and too many living comrades frying up the livers and lights of too many slaughtered Cossacks with baby faces. He exaggerated the symptoms of some light shell-shock he sustained during a bombardment and was happy to be transferred to a remount division in that district of Romania known as Transylvania, where he was to sit out the war processing the remnants of the cavalry.

Albert possessed a very special gift with horses. He understood them far better than did the equestrian instructors and veterinary surgeons of the Imperial Army, a fact which generated ill-feeling in some of his brother officers. Others preferred to trumpet Albert's skills as a healer, making extraordinary claims which he was always quick to repudiate.

"There is nothing so mysterious about what I do," he said. "I am patient with the animals. I show them that they are loved. I keep them calm. The rest is up to nature."

Such protestations were so much spitting in the wind. Albert's reputation grew and was even extended to humans, the result of a stupid incident over his batman, Benko. This foolish soldier had allowed his foot to be stamped on by a frightened stallion one afternoon. Instead of reporting the injury immediately to an orderly, Benko had kept quiet and allowed the wound to fester overnight. The next morning, when he hobbled in with the morning coffee, Albert had questioned him.

"Why are you limping so badly, Benko?"

Benko had burst into tears.

"Oh, sir!" he cried. "Would you take a look at it? I daren't go to the surgeon, for I know he will amputate from the knee. He never does anything else."

Stephen Fry, *The Hippopotamus* (1994)