

Alex Miller. *Max*.
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Any reader familiar with Alex Miller's works and critical studies of them will be aware of references to his friendship with Max Blatt and Blatt's encouragement of Miller's ambition to be a writer. As Robert Dixon notes in his *Alex Miller* (2014), for example, 'Friendship, hospitality and literary hospitality, or intertextuality, are fundamental to Miller's thinking about the art of fiction' (xi). Blatt was a Jewish refugee who, after reading one of Miller's early attempts to write a novel, told him about one of his wartime experiences. Miller immediately turned this into fiction, which won Max's approval, and it became his first published story.

Miller recounts this significant moment in his career in his new non-fictional work *Max* in which he attempts to discover more about his once best friend who has been dead since 1981. It outlines his five years of research into Max's past before he came to Australia, during which Miller visits Germany, Poland and Israel. In keeping with the book's epigraph from Joseph Roth, 'the shard outlives the pot,' *Max* is divided into fragments rather than chapters, each of them relating steps in Miller's attempts to reconstruct Max's story and discover why he had felt that his life had been futile.

In 2012 Miller and Stephanie his wife make a trip to Germany to visit their daughter who is working there. On their second visit to Germany two years later Miller decides to consult the German archives to try to find out more about Max's earlier life. In particular, he wishes to refute Max's claim that his life had been futile. It proves difficult to discover more about Max's past though Miller finally gets a response from the Federal Archives which informs him that Max was born in Poland rather than Germany and was originally called Moses. His Gestapo file for 1933 reveals that from 1928 Max had been active in communist and other left-wing movements while the file for 1939 records that Max was on the Gestapo's most wanted list and was the leader of the Neu Beginnen resistance group in Warsaw. He also reads a comrade's letter about Max's torture by the Gestapo in 1933, which had continued to torture him mentally for the rest of his life.

Miller continues his search in Poland, initially visiting Warsaw to go to the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews. He has also promised his friend, the writer Arnold Zable, to visit the cemetery there and place some flowers on the grave of Marek Edelman. Miller does not know anything about Edelman but on visiting the cemetery is shown to the site by a caretaker who also gives him a small bunch of dandelions to place on the grave since no other flowers are available. Later he buys a book about Edelman and learns that he was the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Although very reluctant to do so, Miller has also promised another Melbourne friend, Kitia Altman, a survivor of Auschwitz, that he would visit what was left of this death camp. Once there, he finds that 'Our capacity for registering horror was exceeded' (65), and knows that for once he lacks the words to describe his visit.

On his journeys between Germany and Poland, Miller sees that there is no difference in the landscapes he passes through and realises that this is one of the reasons why the borders

between the two countries had continued to shift over the years. Later, in Berlin, he receives an email from the director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and learns the names of Max's mother and father as well as his younger sister Sara.

Back in Victoria, and on the train to Melbourne to see Kitia, Miller meets another friend and fellow writer, Carmel Bird. When she sees the book about Edelman by Hanna Krall which he is reading, she gives Miller the contact details for Stefan Ehrenkreutz. Through him, Miller is able to contact Jacek and Dorata Olszanka in Poland and learns from them about a message on a Jewish family research site from Liat Shoham, Max's niece, wanting information about Max and his family. Although Miller sends an email back to Liat in Israel, he receives no reply.

In 2017, Miller and Stephanie return to Germany and Poland and meet the Olszankas. Through them, they meet Olek, Chairman of the Jewish Community in Wroclaw, and learn that Max's family had left there sometime in 1935–36. A later email from Olek leads Miller to revise his previous view of Max as a hero and wonder whether he had betrayed his family.

A chance meeting at Perth Writers' Week in 2018 with journalist Fiona Harari provides Miller with an email address for Eva, a friend of Max's niece Liat. This time he receives a reply and learns that Liat is the daughter of Max's brother Martin. He was the only one of Max's two brothers and two sisters to survive the Holocaust. Liat rings Miller and tells him that Max and her father 'had a deep sense of guilt because they had failed to rescue their mother and father' (173). Max's first wife Hanna had also been left behind when he escaped in 1940 and was later shot by the Germans.

Later in 2018 Miller and Stephanie travel to Israel to meet Liat and her brother Yossi. They are accompanied by older friends from the USA, along with their newer friends Fiona Harari and Liat's friend Eva. Liat shows Miller family photographs and letters, including one of Max's brothers and sisters which is reproduced in *Max* along with many others. She tells him that her father Martin had been beaten by the Gestapo for three days in 1933 because they had thought he was Max. Max later arranged for Martin to be taken to Paris and eventually on to Palestine.

Miller's detailed and intriguing mix of autobiography and biography characteristically ends with a tribute to friendship: 'This group of friends who had arrived in my life—they were real and whole while Max would always remain our common link, a broken vessel' (246).

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