

Shimon's Quest: From Israel to India, and Lithuania, with a touch of Tagore

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Shimon Lev fell in love with India with all its faults, peculiarities and attractions.



A file photo of Hermann Kallenbach (right) with his friend Mahatma Gandhi in their South Africa days.

Dr Shimon Lev, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is anything but the typical academic. A traveller, columnist, photographer, history sleuth and adventure seeker, he has something of an Indiana Jones about him.

After completing a compulsory three-year stint in the Israeli military (intelligence section), Shimon, like many Israelis, took a break that brought him to India, an event that proved to be defining.

Shimon fell in love with India with all its faults, peculiarities and attractions. This was in 1985. Since then he has been returning to India once or twice every year, building relations and trying to unearth linkages that go beyond ancient history.

Unlike the celluloid Jones, Shimon is not after crystal skulls or hidden treasure; his is a quest for the links that tie his beloved Israel with India. This was the motive that launched his academic career.

On his return from India and Nepal after a one-and-a-half-year sojourn, Shimon had taken up a photography course. For many years he worked as an itinerant photographer and journalist.

India remained in focus; he returned often during an era when travelling to India was not possible for Israeli citizens. Fortunately, he had a United States passport as well and an Indian visa was never a problem.

When Shimon went back to academics, his India interest grew and he joined the Hebrew University in Jerusalem that offered an India Studies programme. This would ultimately secure his academic career.

During one of his treks in northern Israel, he stumbled upon the remains of Hermann Kallenbach, an ardent Zionist who had lived most of his life in South Africa. Kallenbach's life, which began in Lithuania, fascinated Shimon who wrote about it. For, his family too was from Lithuania; his father was the only survivor of the Holocaust, having escaped to Canada before the outbreak of the Second World War.

The article prompted the long-dead Kallenbach's niece to write to Shimon inviting him to peruse the papers and correspondence left behind by her uncle. Shimon accepted the invitation and on arriving at Kallenbach's niece's house found a wonderfully preserved library full of notes and correspondence. Among all this was a series of letters exchanged between him and Mahatma Gandhi.



Dr Shimon Lev in New Delhi recently — Indranil Banerjee

This was a huge discovery as no one till now had any idea that Kallenbach, an ardent South African architect and Zionist, had had such a close relationship with Gandhi.

“This was a dream for any historian”, recalls Dr Lev, who eventually wrote his masters’ thesis on the Gandhi-Kallenbach relationship. This was later published as a book: *The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach* (2012).

“For my Ph.D., I expanded my previous research to take a larger view of the encounter between the Zionist and the Indian national movements”, he explains. His Ph.D. thesis completed in 2016 was eventually published as a book *The Cultural and Political Encounter between Indians and Jews in the Context of the Growth of their Respective National Movements* (Orient BlackSwan, 2018).

Dr Shimon Lev today is considered an authority on Gandhi and the India-Israel relationship. He is also academic editor of the Hebrew editions of *Gandhi: Satyagraha in South Africa* (2014) and *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj* (2016). His publications among others include *The Camera man: Women and Men Photograph Jerusalem 1900-1950* (2016) and *Vesheyodea Lishol* (1998).

It is his renown as an India scholar that has led him down many a historical trail. A few years ago, the current Lithuanian ambassador to New Delhi, Laimonas Talat-Kelpsa, after reading Dr Lev's book on Kallenbach and Gandhi, asked him to help in a project.

Kallenbach, the ambassador pointed out, was born and raised in Lithuania. He could therefore be a symbol uniting Lithuania, India and Israel. The ambassador proposed that Dr Lev help him in his endeavours to put up a statue of Kallenbach and Gandhi in Lithuania and publicise the event.

In 2015, this statue was indeed erected in the Lithuanian town of Rusne on Gandhi's 146th birth anniversary. It was quite an event in Lithuania with Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius and India's minister of state for agriculture Mohanbhai Kundariya unveiling the statue.

Dr Lev's latest visit to India was also the result of an academic accident. While researching Rabindranath Tagore's influence on Jewish literature in the post-1913 period (after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature), he stumbled upon the name of an unknown woman called Schlomith Flaum, who it turned out had been a friend of the old master.

Flaum, raised in Lithuania, had met Tagore in New York in 1921. She was a Hebrew teacher at that time and had helped organise Tagore's lecture which was held in a local synagogue. Attracted by Tagore's ideas on pedagogy, she travelled to Santiniketan the following year, where she spent two years.

The experience changed her life and she met many of the leading figures of the Indian national movement, including Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu. She wrote about her encounters in the Hebrew press in Palestine, about Indian nationalism and Tagore's ideas on education.

After her departure from India, she continued to exchange letters with Tagore and met him again in Berlin in 1930. In 1946, she published a biography of Tagore in Hebrew all by herself. Significantly, she called her publishing house Shanti, and that book remains the only work on Tagore written in Hebrew.

"Flaum's experience under the mango trees in Santiniketan was profound", believes Dr Lev. "She discovered her identity as an Asian. This was an important part of the process of Israelis discovering their identity as Asians and not Europeans. Tagore was important because he symbolised the revival of Asia."

Dr Lev has collected his findings on Flaum and Tagore in his latest book *From Lithuania to Santiniketan: Schlomith Flaum & Rabindranath Tagore*, which is published by the Lithuanian embassy in India and releases across the country this month.

Dr Lev remains restless, sensing that the growing India-Israel relationship has many more undiscovered stories. "I will be back", he grins. Who knows what he will stumble upon next?

The writer is an independent commentator on political and security issues

Tags: mahatma gandhi, shimon lev, rabindranath tagore