

Chapter 4

Writing Hephzibah 1: The role of personal judgments

Preparing and writing a biography involves evaluating the subject's life as well as delineating its events.. Like every other writer, a biographer invariably brings his or her attitudes, prejudices and beliefs to the task; how they are woven into the finished book – or not – is one of the more fascinating aspects of biographical study. Granted there can be no such thing as 'objectivity' and that 'facts' are subject to myriad interpretations, it is possible to write many different life stories of the same person. Also to be considered here are the implications of Virginia Woolf's comment, quoted in an earlier chapter, that we are all complex creatures, with various selves piled up like plates upon a waiter's hand. It is not possible for the biographer to present all these contradictions or 'selves' to the reader; not only is it impossible for these to be known, but the biography itself would be difficult of access.

In my previous biography, that of the Sydney book editor Beatrice Davis¹, complexity of character was less important than other issues. The book was basically a portrait of a woman's working life and, as she was a book editor and I had worked in the same profession for a number of years, it was relatively easy to explain to the reader the parameters of the job, to draw a portrait of an industry and the people who worked within it. This is not to deny that Beatrice Davis was a complex character: she certainly was, but her complexities were not the primary focus of the biography.

¹ Jacqueline Kent, *A Certain Style: Beatrice Davis, A Literary Life*, Viking, Melbourne, 2001

To show some of the complexities in the story of Hephzibah Menuhin, one need only compare her working life with that of Davis. Beatrice Davis's avowed aim was to help a writer produce the best book of which he or she was capable; Hephzibah Menuhin's was to tackle the ills of society on as many fronts as possible, using tools that she and Richard Hauser had fashioned themselves. Beatrice Davis had developed working methods that proceeded in a logical fashion towards a final measurable result – publication of a book: Hephzibah Menuhin and Richard Hauser followed no then-recognised models in doing their work. Because their work involved the exploration of emotional issues, evaluating its success is difficult, if not impossible.

However, one of the most complex aspects of writing about Hephzibah Menuhin was deciding how to deal with episodes in her life about which it was impossible not to feel strongly. This raised the question of my own personal judgments and attitudes and how they would, or would not, affect the biography.

The first of these concerns Hephzibah's actions during 1954, the year she walked out on her husband and children to marry Richard Hauser.

Clearly the marriage was not working well for either party, though it is easy to believe that, had Hephzibah been able to dissemble and hide her unhappiness, Lindsay would not have changed the situation. Both did what they could to keep the marriage alive, but it was obviously a doomed effort. Little more than children when they met and married, they were two different people with different views of life, who could not, finally, talk to or understand each other very well. Though the divorce caused a local scandal – Australians in the 1950s did not expect celebrity

musicians to behave with the same alleged 'moral looseness' as Hollywood film stars – nobody who knew Hephzibah or Lindsay well was especially surprised that the marriage did not last.

It is not difficult to understand why Hephzibah fell in love with Richard Hauser, as I hope the biography makes clear. Hauser came from a European Jewish background, he was passionately committed to his humanitarian work, he was highly intelligent and Hephzibah found him sexually attractive. He also provided a focus and rationale for her community work, something she had wanted for a long time. Hephzibah's decision to leave her two sons Kron and Marston has blackened her posthumous reputation, but it was a decision she did not make lightly, she wanted to be with Hauser and there was no possibility that she could take her boys with her when she left their father. (Unsaid, but probably relevant in this context, is that Richard would have been unlikely to support her attempts to take the boys in any case.)

But I found that, with the best will in the world, it was impossible to avoid being judgmental about Hephzibah's actions. One photograph that will appear in the biography haunts me. It is a posed 'society' picture, taken in 1951, and it shows the family together while Hephzibah reads to the boys. Lindsay in an obviously expensive suit, lounges benignly against a mantelpiece while Hephzibah sits on the sofa with an open book on her knee, Kron aged about eleven in his best school clothes looking over her right shoulder, and seven-year-old Marston is seated on her left. It is clear from the general staginess of the photograph that three out of the four in it are aware that this is a photo opportunity. The exception is Marston. He is avidly listening to every word his mother is saying, and his expression says: Yes? And then what

happened? It is impossible to look at this picture of a guileless, excited little boy without recalling what his mother would do to him three years later.

It is easy enough to sympathise with and understand Hephzibah's reasons for leaving her marriage, for falling in love with Hauser, even for leaving the boys. Yet that photograph makes it impossible not to think: *How could she?*

The real problem for me in writing about the events of 1954 was understanding Hephzibah's way of rationalising her actions. From Sydney, where she was living with Richard Hauser, she tried to explain to her parents and friends what she had done and why. She knew she was the 'guilty' party, and was naturally on the defensive. However, I felt that this did not quite explain the language she used, or her reaction to her friends' views on the matter.

Hephzibah wrote that she had at last found her soulmate, and had achieved a loving relationship with a beloved man. She evidently expected her family and friends to rejoice with her – even those who, like her parents, had thought her happily married to Lindsay Nicholas for many years. When they not surprisingly protested and asked why she had been less than truthful about her marriage (as her father did, for example) she became affronted, accusing them of failing to offer her the support she had expected from them.

Even more problematically, she seemed truly to believe that she had left Kron and Marston for their own good and that her departure, and her relationship with Richard, would give them an example not only of a loving partnership but of what two determined people could do to save the world. 'Who's to say that

by helping people one isn't thereby helping to make the world safer for one's children when they grow up?' she wrote to Kron some years later², adding that the Jewish women who went to the gas chambers with their children would have been better off fighting Nazism than caring for their sons and daughters. I found this rhetoric difficult to accept, defensive or not.

If one can judge by her letters, at no stage did Hephzibah admit responsibility, let alone culpability for the emotional effect of her departure upon her children, nor did she express regret. This is not of course to say that she felt nothing: rarely, as I have said, did she express her deepest feelings in letters to her friends. It is very likely that she shed many tears in private and that she confided her feelings to Richard Hauser alone. Letters she wrote to Richard Hauser during the breakdown of her marriage to Lindsay Nicholas – now in the possession of her daughter Clara Menuhin Hauser who did not show them to me – might well have expressed her anguish in leaving Kron and Marston and her worries about them. All the same, it is hard entirely to disagree with a comment made by her nephew, Michael Nicholas, in an email: 'Hephzibah didn't really understand empathy with anyone else's point of view.'³ (This is probably a view shared by other members of the Nicholas family and it must surely stem from the circumstances of her departure in 1954.)

Any writer who is willing to undertake biography must, I believe, find some rapport with the subject on some level. For some time I was reluctant to credit fairly compelling evidence that Hephzibah Menuhin lacked empathy, that she did not apparently

² Hephzibah Menuhin to Kron Nicholas, 25 May 1962

³ Email Michael Nicholas to author, 22 April 2007

feel any responsibility for the expectations she legitimately aroused in other people. In this, the story of Dany Sachs had to be considered. She was the young French Jewish refugee girl whom Lindsay and Hephzibah quasi-adopted just after World War II. When Hephzibah left Australia to live with Richard Hauser in London Dany, who had left school and was working in a library, wrote to her. Hephzibah's reply was that Richard Hauser had seen Dany's letter, had analysed her handwriting and believed that Dany was not the sort of person they should continue to be in contact with. I have not seen this letter: Dany Sachs told me she had burned it as soon as she read it, but it seems unlikely that she would have invented this story.

Her own explanation for what seems an extraordinarily dismissive, even cruel, action on Hephzibah's part was that Hephzibah seemed really to be 'under Richard Hauser's thumb'.⁴ Kron Nicholas, who knew about the incident, agreed, and added that it was 'a good example of Mum's mean streak. It's a hell of a way to handle a kid and I bet Richard had a good deal of influence. For that he gets no brownie points from me. She as well is low on points in simply going along with it ... This was always my problem with Mum. ... She could turn on or off in the most basic or brutal way, depending on the bloke she was involved with. And yet she was such fun and so intelligent and stimulating and so different and so good to be with most of the time. Until she let those who really liked her, down.'⁵

It is not difficult to conjecture why Hephzibah's son might corroborate Dany's view that Hephzibah was being totally

⁴ Conversation Dany Gross nee Sachs with author, 22 September 2002

⁵ Email Kron Nicholas to author, 17 May 2007

manipulated by Richard Hauser. But Hephzibah's motive is probably more complicated. Her reaction suggests that she wished at least partly to reject her Australian past now that she had a new life with Richard Hauser. Perhaps she convinced herself that Dany, like her boys, needed to be emancipated from her. Most interesting, however, was that friends of Hephzibah to whom I told the story of Dany were not entirely surprised. Their reaction signalled that Hephzibah's 'mean streak' was not unfamiliar to them, though they chose not to elaborate. Their silence on the subject – stemming partly I believed from their generation's reluctance to 'speak ill of the dead' – was as telling as any anecdote.

As well as evidence suggesting that through most of Hephzibah's second marriage 'Richard says' was a driving emotional and intellectual force of her life, there is enough to support the conjecture that Richard was jealous of those aspects of Hephzibah's life that did not directly concern him, or that took her away from him.

During research for this biography, several people commented on the apparent paradox that someone like Hephzibah, who worked so tirelessly for the peace movement and other progressive causes, seemed to have limited ability to enter into or understand the feelings of those close to her. However, it is not really paradoxical: many writers and others have found that it is demonstrably easier to care about large numbers of people in the abstract than to concern themselves with those closest to them. This appears to have been true of Yehudi Menuhin, at least in the

perception of his wife and family.⁶ It is irresistible to conjecture that this lack of personal empathy in Yehudi and his sister can be at least partly traced back to their hermetic childhood.

Yehudi and Hephzibah (not Yaltah) were the centre of their parents' universe: they were brought up with the knowledge that everything their parents did was for their benefit. The Menuhin family was a very close-knit unit controlled by Moshe and Marutha Menuhin; their children learned that only by excelling would they please their parents. In Hephzibah's case, this I believe had two main effects, which seem to be contradictory: she needed always to find a centre of authority for herself (and Richard Hauser had the kind of dominating personality to fill that role) and she lacked a wider sense of other people's perceptions and needs.

These issues of empathy and emotional responsibility have been difficult to deal with in the biography. In presenting as comprehensive a picture as possible they cannot be ignored, but any explanation can be only partial: surely we are more than the product of our childhood and early experiences, for instance. It is easy to say that passing judgment on the subject is hardly the biographer's job, but it is all but impossible to present evidence to the reader without it being influenced by the writer's views in some way. In the case of Hephzibah, and particularly concerning the episodes outlined above, I have attempted to be unsparing but not unkind; to place the evidence before the reader and to draw such conclusions as seem appropriate. However, I have not dealt with Hephzibah's complexities altogether to my satisfaction.

⁶ Norman Lebrecht, 'Yehudi Menuhin: So much love for man, so little for us', *La Scena Musicale*, Vol 5 No 7, April 2000