

Book Review

DOWN MEMORY LANE: PETER ELLINGER'S MEMOIRS¹

by Peter Ellinger

CHOO Han Teck

*LLB (Hons) (National University of Singapore); LLM (Cambridge);
Judge of the Supreme Court of Singapore.*

1 Peter Ellinger celebrates his 90th birthday on 25 April 2023 with the release of *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs*, the narrative of his life. He was born in Vienna, Austria to Jewish parents, but escaped with them before the start of World War II. The family moved to Palestine and Ellinger was there when the state of Israel was created. After graduating from the Hebrew University in 1959, he went to the University of Oxford and obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree. He practised law for a time in Israel before embarking on an academic career which took him to Singapore, Wellington, New Zealand and Melbourne, Australia.

2 A memoir is not merely the spinning of one's personal history into the fabric of a narrative. It is also a personal act of constructing one's identity, an identity that, in the process of development, escapes the eyes of the subject himself. In that sense, it is a search personal to the memoirist, distinct from the narrative intended for his or her other readers. Ellinger seems to see it in this light as he concludes that "the account of my odyssey is ... complete"² Approaching his 90th year, he acknowledges: "Future developments affecting the world will be the start of a new journey. In all probability, I shall not be a part of it."³

3 A specific concern gnaws at the author from the start to the end of his book – and that is, his obsession in ensuring that the memoirs convey an accurate picture. Throughout the book he reminds his reader, and by the same token, himself, that "the story is objective"⁴ Ellinger wrote his memoirs as a series of letters to his friends in the comfort that they will find that his book accurately captures the accounts of his life. He

1 World Scientific, 2023.

2 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 405.

3 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 405.

4 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p xvi.

gave much thought into separating fact from fiction, and was careful to warn whenever an event described may not be complete. This obsession with objectivity makes his memoirs all the more intriguing.

4 Ellinger's academic specialty was in banking, finance and securities law. But this 405-page-long book has barely a dozen pages spread throughout which talk about the intricacies of law, especially the field in which Ellinger has, over the decades, become an acknowledged expert. Disappointment therefore awaits the commercial-minded bookworm hoping to find deep legal analysis of banking and finance law in this book. This is a book about Ellinger's life, not a textbook of his work.

5 The attraction of this book is the life of its author, the events that shaped it, and how they affected his thoughts and feelings at the time, and in retrospect, when he revisits them in his trove of memories. The introspection through retrospective reflections teaches us that history, personal or otherwise, has two meanings because it has two interpretations – one when the event itself is unfolding, and the other when it is re-examined years later. Some things change when they travel through the tunnel of time; they emerge in a different form than when they enter it.

6 Generally, the attraction of a memoir depends on the autobiographical subject, that is, the author – to be precise, the author and his or her life. Authors like Nelson Mandela and John Le Carré can write fascinating memoirs because they are famous. They are famous because of the lives they led; lives that have a universal impact. People who do not know them can identify with their lives. Peter Ellinger did not live a life as exciting as Mandela's or Le Carré's. He not only did not take part in fights; he was averse to confrontation. He does not have tales of intrigue that Le Carré, an old spook, has. His life is, in almost every aspect, an ordinary one.

7 Yet, this is a book that one will not want to skim through. It has an allure that is not immediately apparent. This book will certainly be of great interest to people who know Ellinger, but those who do not know him will not be bored. They will not only find it captivating, but also stimulating. This is not a book to be read merely as a memoir of a professor of law; it is best read like a novel. This is not because it is fiction; on the contrary, it proves fact to be more interesting than fiction. In the hands of its thoughtful author, this book takes the reader to many realms of imagination and through layers of feelings.

8 The memoirs of Ellinger cover two aspects – his career and his personal life. Both were shaped by fortuitous events. Ellinger recalls

how they came about and how the two became entwined. His personal life centred on his love for antiques and what he calls his “bible critique studies”.⁵ From early childhood, Ellinger became proficient in more than one language. He became proficient in English, German and Hebrew, but to his regret, his father listened to his mother and did not send the young Ellinger to a French school. His clashes with tradition began in primary school – where his non-kosher lunches (which included ham) packed by his mother, drew derision from his orthodox classmates. It was at that young age that Ellinger turned away from his Jewish faith: “I was about nine years old when my scepticism matured into sheer agnosticism and disbelief.”⁶

9 Ellinger attended secondary school at Tichon Hadash High School in Tel Aviv. There, he tells us, he became fond of English literature, history and zoology. He was profoundly influenced by his Old Testament teacher (Mr Frank) who was agnostic. It was during his years at Tichon when the state of Israel was founded. Ellinger’s account of the politics of the day reveal his belief that it was a mistake for Israel not to have recognised Palestine. All in all (a favourite phrase of Ellinger’s), he did not feel at home in Israel, nor in Vienna, his birthplace. The Suez Canal crisis took place when Ellinger was practising law with Bar-Shira in Tel Aviv. The international events that followed, and the more personal one concerning his Arab friend whose home was acquired by the Government, led Ellinger to look to a career overseas.

10 His next stop was the University of Oxford where he received guidance – and corrections to his grammar – by Guenter Treitel. “Under Treitel’s guidance, my writing ability improved”,⁷ Ellinger recalls. The proof is in the clarity of his memoirs. He found good and lasting friends like Lalith Athulathmudali from Ceylon. Lalith was the president of the Oxford Union when Ellinger arrived. Lalith went on to teach in Singapore, and with his encouragement, Ellinger applied for a post of Assistant Lecturer in Singapore.

11 The Dean at the Faculty of Law was Lee Sheridan. The British forces were still in Singapore when Ellinger arrived. Just as he witnessed the founding of Israel, Ellinger was present at the creation of Singapore in August 1965. His first sojourn in Singapore was eventful in many ways. He met Geoff Bartholomew who was to become his lifelong friend. He

5 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 384.

6 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 33.

7 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 123.

was also brought on a double date by another friend because that friend had “by error dated two girls and needed one more male guest”.⁸ One of the girls was Patricia (Peh Choo) Goh. Ellinger was “captivated by Pat’s beauty, natural dignity and demeanour”.⁹ He fell in love and married her. He had also thought that “she would be less bossy and headstrong than an Israeli girl”.¹⁰

12 Patricia was Chinese educated and “had a command of some 15,000 Chinese characters, was well read in Chinese classic literature and had, at one stage, taught Chinese language and writing at secondary school level”.¹¹ But she remained attached to Chinese culture and values. A beautiful and self-assured woman, she “abandoned Taoism and became a Christian”.¹² Although he assured his mother that he would not become a Christian, Ellinger was to confess in his memoirs that with the benefit of the hindsight of a lifetime, he failed to appreciate the difficulties of Patricia’s deep Chinese roots. The one important language in his life that he ought, perhaps, to have learnt but did not, was Chinese, and thus forsook the opportunity to come to terms with his wife’s culture: “At the time, I did not realise that I was bound to pay a heavy price.”¹³ Ellinger’s marriage is the subplot intertwined with his career.

13 With the departure of the British from Singapore, Ellinger feared that Singapore’s future was uncertain and he looked elsewhere to advance his career. He landed a teaching post in Wellington. New Zealand was a place that Ellinger had come to like and where he found happiness. Unfortunately, Patricia did not like it. Ellinger explained that in the end, when contemplating his retirement home, he ruled out Wellington because he agreed with the advice once given to him, to never return to a place in which you were happy.¹⁴

14 It was during his teaching stint in Wellington that he found the opportunity to spend a year in Freiburg on a Humboldt fellowship. There

8 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 160.

9 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 163.

10 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 163.

11 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 163.

12 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 162.

13 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 169.

14 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger’s Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 380.

he enjoyed himself, and so did Patricia. It was also there, in Germany, that Ellinger developed a deep insight into the bonds of brotherhood and how bigoted hatred can tear that bond. It was Patricia who found an advertisement for a new Chair of Law at Monash University. Ellinger applied, and after a series of fortuitous events, was offered the position of Chair. His two stronger rivals cancelled each other out, it would seem.

15 By his account, Melbourne was the place that established Ellinger's career, but it also exhausted him. He was in need of a change, and his Dean at Monash, Gerry Nash, urged Ellinger to accept the post of Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore. The second sojourn to Singapore gave him many memorable moments and the final parts of his book seem to contain the most vivid memories, both good and bad, in his life. His relationship with Patricia had been rocky for many reasons. One of which was the intrusion of Patricia's sister, B.¹⁵ It was in his second sojourn in Singapore that his estrangement from Patricia and her family became complete. Nonetheless, Ellinger remained ever longsuffering. Determined to be, at least, a dutiful husband, he remained with Patricia until her death did they part. After moving to Mandarin Gardens, Ellinger sold his Pandan Valley flat to pay for Patricia's expensive medical treatments.

16 In his later years in Singapore, Ellinger had a spiritual encounter that led him to return to his Jewish community, but he eventually returned to his agnostic life, continuing with his bible critiques, this time, learning Mid-Egyptian in order to understand the original biblical sources better. He found further fulfilment when he joined Rajah & Tann as a consultant. There he worked, not so much in litigation but in the drafting of banking documents. He confesses in his memoirs that he loathed modern bankers whose "objective was to protect themselves against actions based on their employees' sharp practices by the insertion of exemption clauses in their Standard Terms and Conditions".¹⁶

17 In the last parts of his book, Ellinger remembers his friends (by name) and recounts his personal problems with the ravages of an old Hepatitis C infection, as well as Patricia's futile battle with cancer. Having left his good friends behind in Wellington and Melbourne, Ellinger found new ones in Singapore, which over time, he came to love as his true home – his chosen domicile. His friendship with Cathy Zuzak endures and continues, it seems, to blossom. They meet, go on excursions, visit

15 Ellinger avoided naming some persons and referred to others by initials.

16 Peter Ellinger, *Down Memory Lane: Peter Ellinger's Memoirs* (World Scientific, 2023) at p 357.

the cinema, have meals together and chat twice a day over the telephone. Perhaps there is more than one place in which one can find happiness.
