



## **The history of Jerusalem, told by the scion of one of its most famous families**

**It's not surprising that Simon Sebag Montefiore has written a monumental biography of Jerusalem. A wide-ranging interview on the occasion of its publication in Hebrew (and a few words about Kate and William).**

**By Maya Sela | Sep. 25, 2013 | 10:28 AM**



**Jerusalem's Yemin Moshe neighborhood as it looks today. It could become the new burial place of Sir Moses Montefiore. Photo by Michal Fattal**

Simon Sebag Montefiore exudes charm. It's the sort of charm that emanates from aristocrats who move about this world confidently. Their place is clear to them. Perhaps because of the certainty, he seems untroubled with matters of honor. He is very humorous, void of mannerisms and highly accessible. In fact, the London-born writer and historian is the only foreign writer I've ever met who

doesn't use an agent, personal assistant or PR person to coordinate meetings. He responds quickly to emails, arranges his meetings by himself, sends materials if needed, asks how I am.

We first met about a year ago, in Jerusalem. His monumental work, "Jerusalem: The Biography" (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), was supposed to come out about then in a Hebrew translation, but was delayed due to editing constraints. The Hebrew translation had taken more time than had been originally thought, he explained a few weeks ago in a phone call from London, because very precise checking of sources was required.



**Sebag Montefiore Photo by Yael Engelhart**

"They [the translators and publishers in Israel] had to check all the Hebrew and go back to the Talmud and the Torah and check the exact translation, and render it into the original ancient Hebrew. It was a huge task and I am delighted – I wanted it to be correct," Montefiore says.

When we met last year, he was in Jerusalem for the ceremony rededicating the flour mill built in 1857 by his great-great uncle, banker and philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore, in the Yemin Moshe neighborhood. The event was held in the presence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"We sort of cut the ribbon," the writer says. "It was a very moving moment, I must say. I mean, obviously all moments of political theater are in some ways a blend of magnificent poignancy, emotion and absurdity all mixed together, and as a historian one is fascinated by this mixture."

Much has happened in the world in the intervening year, including the birth of Prince George to Kate Middleton and Prince William. This comes to mind because of the reports that the present Duchess of Cambridge and her sister, Pippa, had attended the launch of Montefiore's book "Young Stalin" in 2007. That was before Kate married her prince.

There is no choice but to ask about the newborn. It was obvious Montefiore would not talk about this, but he has a delightful way of evading the question. "I haven't met the royal baby," he tells me, "but obviously I was very excited about that, it's great news. I have no idea if I will ever see him. If you ask me directly, I would have to say that I might never see him. That's the reason for the boring answer, so I'd leave that if I were you.

"Honestly," he continues, "I don't see them very much. I went to the wedding, as you know. I was very proud to be there; it was really lovely, a real piece of history."

We talk about being Jewish in Britain, where, as Montefiore says, “the Jews are a great minority.” His own mother’s family reached the country from Lithuania at the beginning of the 20th century; his father’s family originated in Spain and moved to Morocco and Italy.

He observes that most Britons outside the big cities have never met a Jew: “On the other hand, you can look at the history of families like Montefiore and Rothschild. [Moses] Montefiore was an immigrant from Italy and always wore a yarmulke, but he became friends with the aristocracy and the royal family. He was an oligarch. Naturally, the English looked very differently on the poor Jews who came from Russia than they did on the grand Jews whom everyone knew had palaces in Park Lane. But there was snobbery among the Jews, too, though that is never mentioned: Jews are as snobbish as anybody else.”



**Moses Montefiore portrait, by Solomon Hart (1840)**

He says he discerns a great difference between British Jews and those living in the United States. “In America, interestingly, the Jews are literally part of the ruling class. American Jews are used to being in this position, so they possess a great confidence that English Jews and European Jews don’t have. We European Jews, even in England, always have our bags packed.”

In World War II, he says, the Montefiore family had a plan. “If the Nazis landed, they were going to drown their children in their swimming pool,” he says. “You’ve got to realize that for European Jews, it’s always different than for American Jews. But still, I am an openly Jewish person and haven’t encountered any anti-Semitism – and I have met all sorts of people in my life. I find that Britain is about the most tolerant country in the world.”

***Did you never try to be less Jewish when you were around certain people?***

“No, I’ve tried to be more Jewish. I always find that the more Jewish you are, the more people respect you. The anti-Israel thing is quite a different matter. In England it’s a fetish and a fashion, and in Scandinavia it’s an obsession. Israel hasn’t helped itself either, with its appalling diplomatic clumsiness. It is totally unnecessary, an unforgivable folly, because actually, as Israeli politicians know, our countries and our democracies have a great deal in common. The situation pains me enormously – it is unwise and unnecessary. That said, the Europeans do tend to delegitimize Israel and turn ‘Israel’ into a dirty word, which is unforgivable.”

Born in London in 1965, Montefiore is married to the best-selling author Santa Montefiore (born Palmer-Tomkinson). They have two children. At the time he met his wife-to-be, who is from an upper-class family, and is a convert to Judaism, he was a journalist covering the 1990s wars in Chechnya and Georgia.

“I covered all sort of wars in the former Soviet Union, so I saw some terrible things,” he recalls. “I had a very secure early life; I was an investment banker for a bit. But by the time the Soviet Union started to collapse, I was kind of hungry for something different and I went out there.”

***If you needed adventure, why didn't you take up extreme sports?***

“Because I'm frightened of that. I don't like sports, I'm not interested in sports, I hate sports. My wife is very sporty. She's an athlete and comes from a family of ski champions. The fun in life is to try and have an interesting life, isn't it? It's short!”

Apparently Montefiore was considered a ladies' man in his younger days, and the British gossip columns were keen to cover his exploits. One of the women he dated was model Koo Stark, who was also Prince Andrew's girlfriend for a time.

**Ties with royalty**

Montefiore's wedding to Palmer-Tomkinson in October 1998 – which took place in a London synagogue – was widely reported, not least because it was the first time Prince Charles and his future wife, Camilla Parker Bowles, appeared together in public. Since then, Montefiore has had occasion to host the two – along with British Prime Minister David Cameron – for dinner, according to the British press.

His brother Adam has lived in Israel for many years after immigrating in 1989. “He's a Zionist,” Simon said during our first conversation, adding, “I believe in the Jewish state, but I don't want to live here, actually – simple as that. I come here a lot. Jerusalem is such an important part of our lives and always has been. We are four brothers and, of the whole family, Adam and I came here the most. We were here every year. I worked [as a teenager] on Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael, where I was the terror of the plastics factory, which was making toilet seats.

“We were surprised when my brother made aliyah, because none of the Montefiores ever had. They came here to help the Jews or to help Israel, but no one ever considered living here, oddly enough. Adam loves Israel, he loves the wine here – he has become one of the leading experts on Israeli wine. His children served in the army. He's actually more Israeli than he is English. He also drives like an Israeli, so I won't ride in the same car with him.”

Simon's Israeli niece and nephew, Rachel and David, recently established a winery here, under the Montefiore label. “I just received a first box of their wine today. It's delicious and I am very proud,” their uncle says.

**Ambitious endeavor**

Montefiore's books – histories and two novels – have been translated into 40 languages. His book “Catherine the Great & Potemkin” was a candidate for the 2001 Samuel Johnson Prize; “Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar” was named History Book of the Year at the 2004 British Book Awards; and “Young Stalin” was awarded the 2007 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Biography.

His ambitious history of Jerusalem first came out in 2011. Bill Clinton chose it as his book of the year, and Henry Kissinger, too, was apparently not immune to its charms: Montefiore's “magnificent” work contains all the greatness of 3,000 years of history, the former U.S. secretary of state said, adding that Montefiore's “masterful research and gift for bringing it all to life make this fascinating work a treasure trove for scholars and laymen alike.”

“There are millions of books on Jerusalem,” the historian explains, “most of them about the last 200 years. There are only about four periods in Jerusalem’s history that are well known, even among Israelis. There’s the biblical period, of course, the period from the Maccabees to Jesus, the Crusades and then Zionism. There are also millions of books about the Zionist history of Jerusalem, but as a historian there is no point in my writing a Zionist history of Jerusalem, any more than I would wish to write an anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian historical narrative. Neither is worth doing, because they would just be polemical books.

“Of course, there are thousands of history books written by people like [late Jerusalem Mayor] Teddy Kollek and sold to Jewish tourists here. They are lovely books, but they don’t get to the essence of things. I had the idea to write a book containing the whole history of Jerusalem – all the sects, all the cults, all the religions, all the conquerors from King David to Netanyahu. Basically, from Babylon to Bibi,” he laughs.



**Dedication of the reconstructed windmill, October 2012. From left: Sebag Montefiore, Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat, PM Netanyahu, the Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov. Photo by Moshe Milner**

***Your title is “Jerusalem: The Biography.”***

“I love the fact that in the Jewish scriptures it is always described as a beautiful woman. I did not describe it as ‘a biography,’ but as ‘the biography,’ because what’s the point of writing an ‘a’? After taking so much trouble, ‘the’ is preferable.”

When he started working on the book, Montefiore says he realized why no one had written anything like it before. “It was incredibly difficult, a nightmare,” he recalls. “I didn’t sleep for about three years, because I felt the history of the Jewish people on my shoulders. But I am also a historian and I don’t want to write propaganda or polemics. Also, I love Arab culture. My family, the Sebags, came from Morocco, and I am very much at home in that world.”

In our meeting in Jerusalem a year ago, Montefiore told me that he gets a great many letters from readers. He is very active on the social networks and maintains Facebook and Twitter accounts. “The curse of the Internet for writers is people’s hobby of knowing everything,” he says. “Many people write that you got something wrong, when in fact it’s they who are wrong. But I’m thrilled anyone is reading my books.”

Now he will be able to receive responses from Israeli readers, too. Meanwhile, he says, he has received many letters “from fanatical Christians who wanted to know how I could possibly say that

Jesus was crucified naked; letters from outraged Jewish people asking how I can doubt King David's existence; and letters from furious Palestinians saying I am an Israeli stooge. I am accused of everything, which is good – if everyone is angry, that's good.

“People who know the subject well, like Kissinger and Bill Clinton, as well as Palestinian officials and Israeli politicians, have all been very positive. I think quite a few world leaders have read the book. It was a complete surprise to me when Bill Clinton chose it as his book of the year – within one hour it climbed 300 places on Amazon! The amusing thing is that Clinton himself is a character in the book, as is Netanyahu. In fact, when I meet these people I find it more interesting to talk about history with them than about the here-and-now.”

***Your wife once said that you are afflicted with Jerusalem syndrome.***

“Of course. I love the city. I love the heat and the excitement of Israel, and I will always love Jerusalem. To write a book like this, one has to be obsessed and immersed in the subject.”

Asked if he envisions a solution to the thorny problem of Jerusalem's status as capital of Israel and also of a potential Palestinian state, he says: “No, not in the short term. I think in the long term the human faculty for forgiveness is greater than for bigotry and hatred, but at the moment I don't see it. Still, I know that history always punishes states that are not generous to those who are weaker than they are. Always.”

**Vision of the bones**

During our recent phone call, I remind Montefiore about his idea for reinterring in Israel the remains of Sir Moses Montefiore, who died in 1885 at the age of 100. He told me last year that Golda Meir had wanted to do that in the 1970s, but that the Montefiore family had objected. “They vetoed the idea,” he says, “because that older generation liked to think of Moses Montefiore as a sort of Anglo-Jewish grandee. They said he is English and should remain where he is. But now it's 40 years later, you know. His tomb, by the way, is extremely grand and magnificent. Only a Victorian magnate would possess the grandiosity to build himself a biblical tomb in Ramsgate, which is a seaside resort [in southeastern England].”

Montefiore told me he had broached the subject with Netanyahu in their meeting. “I said to the prime minister that, as far as we are concerned, the State of Israel should bring him here, as he would want to be buried in Jerusalem. He was an Englishman, but as a religious Jew who believed in the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, of course he would want to be buried here. His dream was the restoration of the Jewish nation.

“I would normally not suggest disturbing the grave of anybody, but for a religious Jew to be taken from an English suburban seaside resort to the holy city – he would want that. But it has to be done by the State of Israel, it is not something one can do privately.”

At the windmill ceremony, Montefiore also met with then-Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger. They agreed that, rather than re-inter his great-great uncle on Mount Herzl, the remains should be buried at Mishkenot Sha'ananim, the compound in which the windmill is located in Yemin Moshe. Now, though, Montefiore tells me the idea of bringing the remains to Israel stirred opposition. “There was a big scandal,” he explains. “The whole family was shocked at the idea. But it might yet happen.”

As a boy, he continues, he hated the cult around Moshe Montefiore. “We were very bored with hearing about him, and when I started to write the book I was scarcely going to mention him,” he admits. “He may be a giant figure in the Zionist narrative, but in the history of Jerusalem he is not exactly Herod the Great.”

“But I am proud of Moses Montefiore. He went all around the world to intercede for Jews. He risked his personal safety, was fearless and did really important things. He was an astonishing character. Incidentally, he didn’t have a great sense of humor. He took himself quite seriously. He was a man who built himself a mausoleum and wasn’t shy about his importance. And of course there’s his sex life – which is controversial, to say the least. He fathered a child with a 16-year-old housemaid when he was 81 and he had mistresses. He was a real Victorian titan, and all the Victorian titans had secret lives. It makes him more interesting for me, less of a saint.”

Since our meeting last year he has participated in a BBC miniseries on Rome (“The History of the Eternal City”), after doing a similar one on Jerusalem (“The Making of a Holy City”). Now, he tells me, he is in the process of filming a new series, on Istanbul.

Montefiore also says he is in negotiations with a Hollywood producer about a drama series based on “Jerusalem: The Biography,” and that there will also be a dramatic British-produced miniseries about Stalin. “Suddenly all my books are being made into miniseries for television,” he notes. His latest novel, “One Night in Winter” – set in Moscow in the final days of World War II – has just been published in Britain. And he is at work on another history book, “The Romanovs: Rise and Fall, 1613-1917.”

How does he keep up such a frenetic pace? “Now I am just reading books on the Romanovs,” he says. “When I’m writing I wake up early and then I work until about 2 P.M. I then have lunch and do nothing for the rest of the day. In the evening I have a margarita cocktail – that’s all.

“We’ve got a book, we’ve got a TV series and now we also have wine,” he concludes. “Whatever next?”

