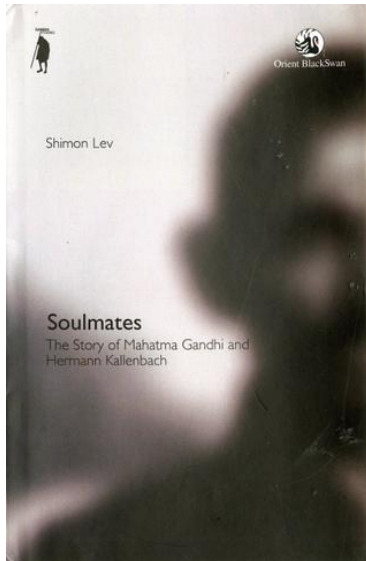


THE HINDU

The Mahatma's strange friend

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It chronicles the deep mutual respect Gandhi and Kallenbach developed for each other and retained till the end

Sixty four years after his death, India's founding father never for a moment ceases to enchant people with his thought and philosophy, his comradeship and friendships, his preoccupation with khadi, abstinence and naturopathy. There is no dearth of research into his life and times. His curious compound of mysticism and astuteness continues to keep his mass appeal intact.

Many studies on Gandhiji's South African sojourn have mostly focussed on the connection between him and his White supporters and running of the Tolstoy Farm. What is presented in the existing literature is mostly Gandhi-centric and overshadows almost all others who worked around him or influenced him.

Shimon Lev's *Soulmates — The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach* takes a different look in an attempt to fill this lacuna. It explores the unique relationship between the two more from Kallenbach's point of view. There are also a few books that do shed light on Kallenbach as the Mahatma's long lasting friend but are said to have largely belittled the East

Prussian architect's unique involvement in Gandhiji's life and his contribution to the Indian struggle in South Africa.

Shimon's book came close on the heels of *The Great Soul – Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* by Joseph Lelyveld that created outrage. But this one staved off controversy even though both the books draw from the same archive of letters, papers, photos and documents.

Israel-based artist and writer Shimon Lev's work is based on five years of exclusive research in Kallenbach Archive maintained by Dr. Isa Sarid, Hermann Kallenbach's great-niece in Haifa. He sets himself on a different trajectory because his work is based on the premise that "one cannot understand Gandhi without understanding his relationship with those who were closest to him during his metamorphosis from Mohandas to the Mahatma."

Shimon says in the introduction that he started his project with an academician's systematic perspective purely for research purpose but it was at the behest and encouragement of historian Dr. Ramachandra Guha that he published it as a book.

Comprehensive study

What sets Shimon's book apart is that it is the first ever full-length comprehensive study of the enigmatic friendship Gandhiji shared with the Jewish architect of German origin, Hermann Kallenbach. It is an authentic account of how the friendship moulded and grew in South Africa and beyond and is based more on Kallenbach's letters to his family and Gandhiji and also what Gandhiji wrote to him. It digs deep into Kallenbach's complete immersion in the Indian struggle and his emotional attachment to and high appreciation of Gandhiji as a man of the highest moral order.

The first part of the book deals with Gandhiji's and Kallenbach's first meeting in South Africa in 1904 and how both of them lived together till 1914 dedicating themselves to spiritual development and managing the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa. In concise language it traces the links between the beginning of Gandhiji's political life in South Africa and its repercussion and development in India.

The second part deals with their meetings in the 1930s when Kallenbach grew increasingly interested in Zionism and travelled to India to enlist the sympathy of Gandhiji, who had opposed the Zionist cause in the past. Kallenbach's personal relationship with Gandhiji effectively made him the most significant link between the Indian national movement and the Zionist movement.

"The complete absence of diplomatic relations between India and Israel, which ended only in the 1990s, has contributed to the general ignorance about the relationship between the two," says Shimon.

What is engaging is the friendship the two remarkable individuals struck for lifetime despite being as different as chalk and cheese before they met and arguably went on to become the closest of friends during their respective periods of personal crisis.

Gandhiji consistently described his initial astonishment at Kallenbach's hedonistic lifestyle and emphasised on his personal transformation to an ascetic: "I was startled at his love of luxury and extravagance. He was single and was expending Rs.1200 monthly on himself. But he asked searching questions concerning matters of religion. We talked of Gautam Buddha's renunciation."

When Gandhiji was released from jail in 1908 Kallenbach went to pick him up in his new car. But Gandhiji sat in it with torment that could be read on his face and he rated him severely for his folly. "Put a match to it at once," he said. Kallenbach put it in the garage for a year and for the next 11 years did not have a vehicle.

Gandhiji repeatedly warned Kallenbach against wasteful expenditure and stressed that he should treat his own money as he would public funds, both economically and wisely. Highly influenced by Gandhiji's ideas of Satyagraha and equality among human beings, Kallenbach donated a 1,100-acre farm near Johannesburg, which was used to run Gandhi's famous "Tolstoy Farm" that housed the families of satyagrahis. It was in this house Gandhiji held numerous discussions on religion, satyagraha, diet and ahimsa and where the best of East existed in a peaceful intellectual and spiritual companionship with the best of West, mutually influencing each other.

Abandoning the life of a wealthy, sport-loving bachelor, Kallenbach adopted a simple lifestyle, vegetarian diet and equality politics of Gandhiji and reduced himself to such simplicity that his expenses came to Rs.120 per month. In Gandhiji's words, they became "soulmates" and nicknamed each other as "Upper and Lower House", an allusion to the British Parliament and House of Lords.

Together with Henry Polak, another close friend and follower of Gandhiji, Kallenbach was associated with Gandhiji throughout the Satyagraha in South Africa and was actively involved in the 1912 Epic March, the climax of the Indian campaign of Civil Disobedience. The book relies on several incidents to deal with the fascinating relationship, surprising in its honesty and force and strewn with expressions of love. Some rare photographs borrowed from the Kallenbach Archive augment the text.

Oath of celibacy

Shimon specifically mentions that although there is an implicit suggestion in some publications of a homosexual element to their relationship, he feels "this was unlikely". After the 1906 Zulu Rebellion, Gandhiji took an oath of celibacy and the fulfilment of this vow became a lifelong struggle. Kallenbach too took a similar oath for an exceptional lifestyle which emphasised nourishment, cleanliness and chastity.

The rise of Nazism and Hitler's anti-Jewish propaganda shocked Kallenbach into a rediscovery of his Jewish roots. Disagreeing with Gandhiji, he was convinced that Hitler had to be resisted by violence. Yet, he remained Gandhi's right hand man and followed his principles and ideals with unstinted devotion. In 1939, the two met for the last time during Kallenbach's second visit to India.

The book provides an insightful glimpse into the deep mutual respect and endearing concern the two had for each other till the end and how they had affected each other's thoughts and ideas. Besides being a valuable addition to Gandhi studies for the historian, scholar and lay reader alike, the book will also attract those interested in India-Israel relationship.

Soulmates narrates the story that needed a telling based on evidence. It personifies a carefully nurtured history of aspirations of two men behind the transformations.

SOULMATES – The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach: Shimon Lev; Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 595.

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