

# The Gazette

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## Growing up Jewish in New Zealand:

### female comic packs a punch

Deb Filler does a one-woman stage show about growing up Jewish in New Zealand. It is not called *Once Were Accountants*.

That was a test. Readers offended by the quip are going to be enraged by parts of *Punch Me in the Stomach*, which airs tonight on Adrienne Clarkson Presents.

Filler's show can be described as Jackie Mason Meets Tracey Ullman. She has the British comedienne's flair for mimicry and the Lower East Side social satirist's acerbic wit.

*Punch Me in the Stomach* is a combination of Filler's reminiscences and 36 character sketches, including portrayals of her sister, her mother, aunts, uncles and maternal grandmother; a WASP neighbor ("we're just having tea with the little Jewish girl"), her first boyfriend and, most movingly, her father. Sol Filler is a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz. His post-war odyssey took Filler to New Zealand, where he married into an émigré German-Jewish family (they had fled in 1938) that did not approve of the match.

"He's got no family," sniffs Deb Filler, playing her mother's disappointed mother. "He's got no prospects, and he's a baker.

"Well, that's not the worst thing that could happen," she adds, sighing. "The

worst thing that could happen is that he's Polish - and he is."

This lamentation is delivered in a middle-European lilt: "vell, zat's not zee vurst..." Filler reserves her thickest accent and most sing-song whine to portray relatives of Polish ancestry: Aunt Zelda secreting a "pool of shvitz," Uncle Mendel the hypochondriac, the

obsessively generous Auntie Rae and morbid Uncle Issy.

The names don't matter. These are classic Jewish archetypes that have been amusing audiences since the vaudeville days of Fanny Brice and Gallagher & Sheen.

Bitterly ironic, self-deprecating humor is an essential element of the Eastern European Jewish culture that the Nazis tried so hard to destroy. We are very good at laughing at ourselves. It is a survival skill - one that has proved very useful

to a people who have had to survive a great deal of adversity, including persecution and genocide. As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, Deb Filler grew up in the shadow of the century's great horror.

The climax of *Punch Me in the Stomach* is a "whirlwind tour of Eastern European death camps." Sol Filler and his daughter go to Poland to visit the ruins of Auschwitz, a harrowing journey that Filler recreates using death camp file footage and playing three roles: her father, a tour guide and herself.

During her introductory remarks, Adrienne Clarkson talks about the adventurousness of her arts series, its commitment to innovation. She recalls being asked if there were anything that Clarkson would not present.

"I jokingly replied: 'Maybe a comedy about the Holocaust.'"

Scratch one more taboo.

*Punch Me in the Stomach* is not exclusively about the Holocaust - and it's not entirely a comedy. There is enough laughter, however, and enough tears to make Filler's tour de force a fitting season's finale for Clarkson's show.

■ *Punch Me in the*

*Stomach* airs tonight on Adrienne Clarkson Presents, CBMT-6 at 7.



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Deb Filler  
"He's a baker"