

## Community

By David Margolis

**E**ric Chaim Kline loves books.

Dressed in khaki Bermuda shorts and a flowery shirt, his hair mussed like a violin virtuoso's, Kline takes a visitor on a tour of his bookshop, describing the contents of the sections and shelves by subject; he stops to pluck individual volumes off a shelf and displays them — in the sort of rambling chaos typical of used-bookshops, Kline apparently knows every title — then answers a customer's questions, interrupts himself to direct a clerk or price a book and, visitor in tow, ends up in the back storeroom where he keeps a selection of particularly rare or valuable volumes. On the subject of books, Kline seems both indefatigably energetic and indefatigably talkative.

Some of the stock in his shop on the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica are just books — \$1 tables and \$3 tables and tall cases filled with volumes on almost any subject you can name. But because Kline likes old books and books that are, well, *interesting*, even his regular retail collection is heavy on out-of-print volumes, some of them pricey.

But Kline has an additional, special interest in collectible and antiquarian books, with a speciality in Judaica and Hebraica.

He keeps 20,000 volumes of the latter in storage, partly because they are safer there. Anyway, it isn't too likely that the street traffic into his store is going to plunk down cold cash for a copy, say, of the 1848 Bagster polyglot Bible (biblical text in half a dozen Romance and classical languages on facing pages, \$750) or the 17th-century Bible illustrated by Gustav Dore (yours for a shade under \$1,000) in the store's back storeroom — or for the other rare volumes in his warehouse.

Kline's store has been, since he moved from Arizona Street two years ago, a significant part of the lively Promenade scene, with its street performers and "boardwalk" atmosphere. Across the way from the left-wing Midnight Special bookstore, down the street from a dozen movie theaters, Kline's walk-in traffic on any Saturday night is, like his book collection, nothing if not eclectic.

Not a few of the books Kline has, both on his shelves and in storage, are what traditional Jews call *seforim*, literally books, but by connotation Jewish religious texts, books not just for reading but for studying. (One person who knows him says Kline has one of the largest collection of such books in Los Angeles.) Kline laments that much of the obvious clientele for such volumes, Orthodox Jews, don't come to his store. "They're worried to be in the same store as secular and even 'heretical' works," he says dryly. (This is not just Kline's paranoia. Some months ago, an unofficial boycott by some parts of the Orthodox community was directed against bookseller Jack Roth in Beverly Hills, whose shop, though it sells only Jewish

# PEOPLE AND THEIR BOOKS



Eric Chaim Kline (inset) and his Santa Monica bookstore

materials, including *seforim*, also stocks materials representing the entire spectrum of Jewish thought.)

These days, the most collectible books, Kline says, are first editions by 20th century writers such as Hemingway or Salinger. "People can relate to them because they've read them," Kline says. The pricing of books is a particular subject of Kline's, and he can theorize at length about why a 20th-century lithograph whose place in art history is uncertain can bring inflated six-figure prices while a book like Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, "On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres" (1543), an unarguably "seminal" work in human intellectual history, goes for a paltry \$75,000. In the end, however, he seems equally baffled both by the inflation of prices in the book market (a signed first edition of Hemingway's 1940 *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can bring up to \$3,000) and by people who would pay thousands for a work of art but would never buy a rare book.

Kline's interest in books has been lifelong — from the "bookish Reform household" in which he grew up to a graduate program at which he surrounded himself with "cartons" of library books. But books as his career he dates to the purchase, while a grad student in Cambridge, MA, in 1981, of an old Hebrew Bible for \$100. That volume, printed in 1666, a year of extreme messianic expectation among both Jews and Christians, interested Kline because it fit into his studies on Jewish mercantilism during the period.

But it wasn't till a bit later, dropping his unfinished Ph.D. thesis and putting aside more communal ambitions ("I really wanted to be a Hillel director, and I think I would have made a good one"), that he began "scouting" used bookshops as far away as New York in search of old and salable books, trading them for others or selling them for a profit,

gradually learning to "leverage" and increase his holdings, working up to buying and selling whole collections. Only 10 years later, he is known nationally and even internationally as a purveyor of books.

Now 41 and unmarried, Kline is a native of L.A. who remains connected to the Jewish community through Wilshire Boulevard Temple, the Reform synagogue where he was raised, and the Library Minyan of Temple Beth Am, the Conservative synagogue he is now most likely to attend. But, he adds, he often attends Orthodox services, too. "Sometimes on Rosh Hashanah, I'll be in four different shuls," he says, marking himself as both deeply committed and philosophically unclassifiable.

Right now Kline's shop has mounted a sale, reducing inventory because Kline, refusing to pay his landlord a hefty rent increase, is, at least temporarily, closing his doors — maybe. First, he is moving his operation a couple of stores down the Promenade to keep the sale going for another month. And after that?

After that, Kline can rent another space and keep his current business going or he can follow what he refers to as the scary path closest to his heart: He can close his store and develop a business based on appraisals and sales of "high-end" rare and collectible books, especially Judaica. Either way, he will remain, in more ways than one, a person of the book. ■

Photos by David Margolis