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NEWS

The Power-Mad Utopians

America needs a broad popular front to stop the revolution from above that is transforming the country

BY MICHAEL LIND

What happens in politics when one major party, or a major faction in both parties, commits itself to doomed utopian projects of social and economic engineering and seeks to capture and use government to impose its vision from above? In such cases ordinary political consensus and compromise become irrelevant. What is needed, in such cases, is the broadest possible coalition to defeat the mad and impossible schemes of these utopians.

Twice in the last half century utopian politics has emerged in the U.S.—once with the Republican Party as its vehicle, and now with the Democratic Party as its base. Old-fashioned conservative “fusionism”—a synthesis of anti-communism, moderate free market economics, and the genteel traditionalism represented by Russell Kirk—was replaced in the wake of the Cold War by what might be called Fusionism 2.0 and its allies on the hawkish left. This post-Cold War coalition, which culminated in the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, was a radical movement, not “conservative” in any sense. It was based on the simultaneous promotion of three

utopian projects: spreading “the global democratic revolution” through “wars of choice” and “humanitarian interventions” in the Middle East and elsewhere; radical libertarianism in trade and immigration policy, combined with the repeal of the New Deal through the privatization of Social Security and Medicare; and the imposition of “family values” as defined by the evangelical Protestant minority that formed the base for the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority.

To say that these were utopian projects does not imply that they did not address genuine problems. For example, following 9/11, Washington had to respond to the transnational terrorist threat. But the U.S. did not have to topple Saddam Hussein and Moammar Gadhafi, nor remain in Afghanistan for two decades after al-Qaida’s local base was disrupted. Preventing terrorist attacks on the U.S. did not require President George W. Bush to declare in his second inaugural address that all non-democratic regimes everywhere must be subverted and overthrown and that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal

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of ending tyranny in our world.” This was utopianism at its most deranged and dangerous.

All three of these revolutions from above by the Bush Republicans—the global democratic revolution, the libertarian economic revolution, and the attempt to universalize evangelical Protestant morality—were, and remain, deeply unpopular with the American public. Already by 2008 the public had grown weary of the forever wars. Obama and Trump both ran on promises of a more restrained foreign policy (Trump delivered, but Obama added two Middle Eastern disasters, in Libya and Syria, to those in Iraq and Afghanistan). George W. Bush’s proposal for partial privatization of Social Security was so unpopular among voters that Republicans refused even to debate it when they controlled the House and Senate. As for the religious right, the American public has always been divided on abortion, a fact reflected in state-level differences now that the Supreme Court has overruled *Roe v. Wade*. The anti-gay rights crusade of the religious right, meanwhile, backfired. By 2021, 55% of Republicans supported gay marriage. The maladroit Moral Majority is now the Moral Minority.

It is in the nature of radical utopian projects in politics that they lead to rule or ruin. In the case of Bush-era Fusionist Conservatism 2.0, all roads led to ruin. Hubris produced a nemesis in the form of Donald Trump, the anti-Bush who won the Republican nomination by denouncing the Iraq War, promising not to cut Social Security or Medicare, and embracing gay rights (though not transgender ideology) and appointing openly gay Republicans to high-ranking positions. Far from being the beginning of a white nationalist takeover, as Democratic partisans absurdly claim, the Trump presidency was the Thermidorian Reaction to the radical Bush revolution.

Today, the threat of utopian politics comes from the radicalized center-left, not from the radicalized center-right. The term “progressivism” was revived in the 1980s and 1990s by Clintonite “Third Way” Democrats to distinguish their business-and-bank-friendly version of the center-left from the older

“What happens in politics when one major party, or a major faction in both parties, commits itself to doomed utopian projects?”

New Deal farmer-labor version. But by the 2020s, “progressivism” came to mean something quite different—a commitment to utopian social engineering projects even more radical than those envisioned by the crackpot Bush-era neocons, libertarians, and religious right.

Three social engineering projects define progressivism in the 2020s: the Green Project, the Quota Project, and the Androgyny Project.

The Green Project is not limited to mitigating global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions by industry and energy production. By itself, decarbonization is a technical project that can be carried out by methods like building nuclear power plants and replacing coal with natural gas in electrical generation.

The Green Project or Green New Deal is not satisfied with decarbonizing energy sources. It invokes climate change as an excuse to radically restructure the society of the U.S. and other advanced industrial democracies, from the way that food is grown to where people live to how people behave. Under the banner of the Green New Deal or the Green Transition, various lesser ideological projects on the left—veganism, replacing cars and trucks with mass transit, urban densification, anti-natalism—have rallied, even though none of

these is necessary for decarbonizing the energy supply.

The Quota Project, embodied in the rote bureaucratic phrase “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI), is another utopian project. Its goal is the radical restructuring of the U.S. and other Western societies on the basis of racial quotas, so that all racial and ethnic groups are represented in equal proportions in all occupations, classes, academic curriculums, and even literary and artistic canons. DEI is affirmative action on LSD.

For the Quota Project, anti-racism is the public justification. But quota-based tokenism is not a solution for specific cases of discrimination against individuals—which can and should be dealt with by race-neutral, anti-discrimination laws. Nor does the Quota Project have any real solutions to offer in the case of class or cultural differences which—even in the absence of racism, conscious or “structural”—would result in some groups doing better than others in various occupations. Like the Green Transition, the Quota Project is a radical utopian program of social reconstruction in search of an excuse that might justify it.

The third of the three utopian projects that define contemporary trans-Atlantic progressivism is the Androgyny Project. This goes far beyond civil rights and humane treatment for victims of gender dysphoria and has nothing to do with the hard-won rights of gay men and lesbians. The Androgyny Project holds that gender identity is independent of biological sex and purely subjective. If a middle-aged man claims that he is a woman, then progressives favor requiring local government to retroactively falsify his birth certificate to show that he was “really” born female and “misassigned at birth.”

Far more comprehensive than “trans rights,” which affect fewer than 1% of the population, the Androgyny Project seeks to redefine all male and female human beings as generic, androgynous humanoids whose sex is a matter of subjective self-definition rather than objective reality.

The bizarre theory that sex is entirely a social construction has led much of the trans-Atlantic establishment to attempt

to impose speech codes on society. Instead of “mothers,” the androgynists insist that we say “birthing people.” A “woman” becomes a “person with a cervix.” It is easy to get confused by the weird jargon. During the 2020 presidential primaries, Democratic presidential candidate Julian Castro declared that every “trans female”—that is, a biological male incapable of pregnancy and childbirth—should have access to abortion, when he meant to say every “trans male” (that is, female).

Like all utopian social engineering projects, the Green Project, the Quota Project, and the Androgyny Project are at odds with reality and are doomed to fail. The Green Project is doomed by physics and engineering. Today 80% of the world’s energy comes from fossil fuels.

Without reliance on nuclear fission or, perhaps, in the future, nuclear fusion, the transition from fossil fuels may never take place at the global level, though it might happen in a few small countries. Politicians can make all the commitments they like, but most energy is likely to come from fossil fuels in 2050, 2100, and perhaps beyond. Instead of resembling the energy transitions of the past—from wood to coal and from coal to oil, gas, and nuclear—the present-day green movement is best viewed as a puritanical moral crusade like Prohibition, with Demon Oil and Demon Gas substituted for Demon Rum and Demon Whiskey.

The Quota Project is doomed by its own internal contradictions. Rigid systems of racial quotas cannot work in societies like those of the U.S. and Western Europe in which immigration is constantly changing the relative proportions of different races and ethnic groups in a national population, while rising rates of interracial marriage are blurring the boundaries among racial categories.

In the name of DEI, public, private, and nonprofit institutions now regularly engage in illegal but tolerated racial discrimination to artificially increase the representation of Black Americans and Hispanics at the expense of so-called “non-Hispanic whites” and so-called “Asian and Pacific Islanders” (the

Census terms for “race” themselves are incoherent and absurd).

If the goal is that every occupation, every club, every reading list, and every sports team in the U.S. have exact proportions of each “race” defined by the census, then every 10 years following the latest census the racial composition of corporate boards, university faculties, sports teams, and artists displayed by museums must be readjusted, with some groups losing their shares and others increasing their shares. Suppose that a wave of immigration from Asia shrinks the relative share of Hispanics and Black Americans in the U.S. population. Does that mean that jobs, grants, and congressional districts should be taken away from Black Americans and Hispanic Americans and given to Asian Americans, to prevent Black American and Hispanic “overrepresentation”? Far better are the alternatives of race-neutral, anti-discrimination laws, protecting individuals of all races, and race-neutral reforms that help economically disadvantaged individuals of all races.

The Androgyny Project, for its part, is bound to crash against reality in the form of human biology. I predict that in a generation the “progressive” policy of so-called “gender-affirming health care” will be viewed in hindsight the way the prescription of lobotomies and chemical castration as cures for homosexuality in the 1950s is viewed today.

It might be objected that reactionary conservatives have long denounced many quite reasonable reforms as “utopian.” That is true. And they have often been wrong to do so. But that does not alter my point.

New Deal energy policy, which sought to protect consumers from price-gouging private electric utility monopolies, was not crazy in the way that the project of replacing all fossil fuels with solar, wind, hydropower, and ethanol is crazy. The movements for equal civil rights for women and for gay men and lesbians did not require the redefinition of “women” and “men.” The conservatives who warned that desegregation was a mad utopian project that was doomed to fail were wrong. The conservatives today—and sane centrists, and liberals,

and leftists—who warn that pressuring or forcing everyone into agreeing that some men can give birth is a mad utopian project that is doomed to fail are correct.

An obvious question arises: If these utopian projects are so inherently at odds with reality, then how can widespread elite support for them in any given era be explained?

The answer, in the case of today’s progressivism as well as various ideological manias of the past, is a combination of cowardice, careerism, and cash.

Cowardice: Nobody on today’s center-left wants to be ostracized for pointing out that solar and renewable energy cannot power an industrial civilization with 7 or 8 billion people. In the same way, no Soviet scientist in Stalin’s USSR wanted to be the first—or even the second or third—to point out that Comrade Lysenko’s theories about the inheritance of acquired characteristics were wrong.

Careerism: DEI provides lots of lucrative jobs, fellowships, HR positions, deanships, professorships, foundation grants, and corporate gifts. Similarly, the open-ended global war on terror/global democratic revolution paid for a lot of mansions, cars, vacations, 401K contributions, and expensive private school tuitions for various government and nonprofit apparatchiks in the Washington, D.C., suburbs and elsewhere.

Cash: Prophets are followed by profiteers. When the prophets of “antiracism” demand reparations for African Americans, what they really mean, explain the profiteers, are government subsidies for historically African American universities, businesses, and nonprofits—that is, indirect subsidies for African American professional and managerial elites, not the African American working-class majority. When Green zealots declare that climate change is an emergency that requires warlike mobilization, what they really mean, the profiteers tell us, is that the tax code should subsidize private investors in solar and wind plants that are set up to take advantage of those subsidies as well as guaranteed purchases by electric utilities. When radical androgynists insist that gender is fluid, they create new business opportunities for great numbers of

self-appointed gender experts, online influencers, diversity consultants, and the pharma companies and surgeons in the medical-industrial complex who profit from private and public insurance payments for “gender-affirming health care.” Apocalypse in the streets, lobbying in the sheets.

All three of these progressive utopian projects—the Green Project, the Quota Project, and the Androgyny Project—will ultimately fail. Of that we can be certain. But we don’t have to wait for them to collapse of their own contradictions and from collisions with recalcitrant reality. Before they can do further damage, we need to stop them in their tracks.

We are constantly lectured about the dangers of “vetocracy” and “paralysis”—often by people who regret the fact that elections and checks and balances slow down or block the particular proposals they favor. But when proposals are destructive or at odds with empirical reality, like the war on fossil fuels, radical race and gender tokenism, and radical androgynism, then they ought to be slowed down or blocked altogether. Although Barack Obama did not act on his own maxim, “Don’t do stupid shit,” is an achievement in itself. A bad status quo is better than a reform that makes things worse.

In international relations theory, it is a truism that “revisionist” coalitions (like the Axis alliance in World War II) which seek to overturn the existing world order need to be limited in membership in order to be effective, while status quo coalitions that seek to thwart the revisionists should be as large as possible, like the United Nations alliance against the Axis which, by 1945, included most of the former fence-sitting republics of Latin America. The same applies to domestic politics as well. It took a broad-based coalition of liberals, social democrats, and populist conservatives to thwart the utopians of the Bush era center-right, and it will take an equally broad and varied coalition to block the insane social engineering projects of the Biden era center-left.

As the progressive juggernaut crashes through the institutional landscape of American society, it is creating ever-growing numbers of angry or

“The Trump presidency was the Thermidorian Reaction to the radical Bush revolution.”

frightened refugees—not merely conservative and libertarians and populists, but also former progressives who simply will not pretend that men can get pregnant, along with pro-industry socialists who reject the pastoralism of the wind-and-solar Green fanatics.

The immediate necessity in American politics is to reject partisan and ideological purity tests in order to form the largest possible anti-progressive front—one that will include militant Enlightenment atheists and Orthodox Jews and Ayn Rand libertarians and Trad Catholics, pre-2010 neoliberals and old-fashioned labor liberals and reactionary paleo-conservatives, small businesses and big businesses threatened by harmful Green New Deal energy policies, left-liberal professors who do not want to sign diversity statements and nuns in Catholic hospitals who refuse to pretend that men are women and women are men.

By its nature, a broad anti-progressive front must include Democrats as well as Republicans and independents. Although the Democratic Party has been hijacked and turned into the primary vehicle for progressive zealots, many Democratic politicians and most Democratic voters do not share these views. To date, sensible Democrats have been shamefully silent. Although few have spoken up to reject the crackpot crusade

to “defund the police,” no prominent Democrat has dared to criticize unnecessary surgical castrations or hormone therapy and mastectomies for patients who suffer from gender dysphoria.

That will have to change. The struggle to break the power of the new utopian progressivism must be a struggle within the Democratic Party to reclaim the power now held by a small cadres of well-organized and well-financed progressive radicals. Freed from a forced association with Green lunatics, anti-racist lunatics, and androgynist lunatics, tomorrow’s center-left might focus again on sensible real-world projects like raising wages and increasing economic security for all.

Once the progressive juggernaut has been first slowed and then stopped and stripped for parts, former members of the anti-progressive front may well fall out among themselves, as members of victorious defensive coalitions often do. Yes, there is a danger that following the defeat of radical progressivism, the default option might be Clinton-Bush economic neoliberalism. But a restoration of pre-woke, fin de siècle free market neoliberalism would be temporary, because it no longer inspires anyone.

Violent resistance to today’s progressive revolutions from above must be ruled out, needless to say. But the diverse members of the anti-progressive front can and should use every peaceful method, from voting in elections to lawfare (litigation) to peaceful protest and satire, in order to frustrate, delay, damage, cripple, divert, stall, and ultimately topple and dismantle the three lumbering juggernauts of green lunacy, equity lunacy, and gender lunacy.

Move over, antifa. Antiprogress is on the way. ■

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THE REST

→ Looking to boost its quarterly profits, the private equity firm **Blackstone**, one of the nation's largest landlords, has been busy firing off hundreds of eviction lawsuits against tenants all across the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Blackstone spent billions of dollars to scoop up thousands of residential apartment buildings, suburban homes, and other properties. For a time, while eviction moratoriums and other pandemic-related relief measures were in effect, Blackstone offered terms to tenants struggling to pay rent that were more favorable than those required by federal and state laws. But pressure from wealthy individual investors in the fund that Blackstone uses to acquire most of its residential properties pressured the firm to change tack, and now those behind on rent in Blackstone-owned properties are finding their mailboxes filling up with eviction notices. "Given Blackstone's massive role in the housing market, the firm's recent move to evict tenants threatens housing stability for families in the U.S. and around the world," Jim Baker, executive director of the Private Equity Stakeholder Project, told the Financial Times.

→ **Lingering concerns over a recession and rising interest rates are slowing consumer demand**—so much so that dwindling purchases have led to the sharpest quarterly decline in the production of cardboard boxes since the 2009 Great Recession. A key barometer for how the economy at large is faring, **cardboard box output offers insights** into everything from grocery sales to online clothing orders and electronics, all of which appear to be experiencing a significant downswing. "Nearly 20% of the U.S. capacity to produce boxes was stagnant last quarter," observes the logistics industry news outlet FreightWaves, a drop that comes on the heels of unprecedented growth for the box industry thanks in no small part to government stimulus checks. "A hangover after a years-long cardboard carnival would be in order—and this one looks nasty."

→ **Quote of the Week:** "These monsters go around the souks poisoning cats and kittens too. They also take cats from the city, where they're being fed and cared for, and dump them in the forest or landfills, where they slowly starve to death. It's insane. Living here is a nightmare." That's **Sylvia Delgado**, an animal shelter volunteer, telling *The Daily Beast* about the ongoing massacre of stray and house-kept dogs as well as other animals while **Morocco hopes to impress FIFA officials** that it should host the next World Cup. After turning a blind eye to Qatar's abusive and deadly treatment of migrant workers who built the facilities for last year's World Cup there, the perennially corrupt FIFA will have a chance to overlook the rampant animal cruelty on Wednesday when Real Madrid and other major soccer teams take part in a FIFA tournament in Tangier and Rabat. Considered a test run before World Cup bids begin in earnest, Morocco has dispatched animal assassins with poisoned meat and darts to try to cull some of the tens of thousands of homeless dogs roaming city streets. Videos obtained by *The Daily Beast* show the barbaric slaying of neighborhood dogs known by name to locals, many of which are piled still half-alive into trucks of dying animals.

THE BIG STORY

A year-and-a-half-long *Columbia Journalism Review* investigation published on Monday lays out in exhaustive detail the pattern of legacy media outlets distorting and ignoring facts about the alleged connections between Donald Trump and Russia before and after the 2016 presidential election. Written by Jeff Gerth, a Pulitzer-winning journalist who had previously spent 29 years at *The New York Times*, the postmortem on the media's approach to the Trump administration identifies several key episodes in which outlets published reports on the Steele dossier, Russian interference in the 2016 election, and phantom connections between Trump associates and the Kremlin that relied on false foundations. In multiple instances the outlets continued to endorse those erroneous reports even as mounting conflicting evidence came to light.

Prior to 2016, "most Americans trusted the traditional media, and the trend was positive," a trust that has almost entirely dissolved since, with today's U.S. media suffering "the lowest credibility—26 percent—among forty-six nations." Gerth also found troubling "the volume of anonymous sources and the misleading way they're often described" by the corporate media, including the use of the attribution of "people (or person) familiar with" used by the Times "over a thousand times in stories involving Trump and Russia between October 2016 and the end of his presidency."

—Sean Cooper

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On Putin and Babyn Yar

An exclusive Tablet interview with Ilya Khrzhanovsky

BY VLADISLAV DAVIDZON

The appointment of the controversial Russian film director Ilya Khrzhanovsky as art director of the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation in Kyiv set off an international uproar. Since then, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has taken memories of World War II and its atrocities from museums and history books and plastered them across the front pages of the world's newspapers. Recently, I met with Khrzhanovsky on the veranda of a seaside hotel in Tel Aviv, a city to which many members of the Russian intelligentsia have fled in the wake of Putin's blitzkrieg and his bizarre accompanying propaganda campaign against a peaceful neighboring nation.

Khrzhanovsky is a flamboyant personality who arrived at the project of remembering the dead of Babyn Yar with tremendous ambitions, his previous project having been DAU, a gargantuan real-life recreation of the life of the Soviet physicist Lev Landau and of the world that he lived in, which was filmed on location in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv by a cast of thousands. A massive premiere for the project was held in 2019 in Paris.

In an alternative timeline, Khrzhanovsky would likely have spent his tenure as art director building controversial and often interesting structures in the Babyn Yar memorial complex. Now, of course, the future looks different to him, as it does to everyone whose life has been touched by Putin's war. Like millions of others with mixed Ukrainian and Russian family backgrounds, including myself, the director has been forced to take sides, and to define himself against an identity that he once claimed as his own.

Khrzhanovsky's choices at Babyn Yar have aroused a litany of contradictory and polarizing public and critical responses, to which I find it easy to relate. Much like his own family, my paternal family were Ukrainian Jews who were evacuated, from Vinnytsia and Chernowitz to Uzbekistan ahead of the Nazis. My family stayed in Uzbekistan to become part of the *nomenklatura* administrative class, while his moved to Moscow to become part of the highest levels of the Soviet and later Russian cultural elite. His father is a famous Soviet animator. The last time we had spoken was in January of 2022, when I had made some rather grim predictions about Putin's impending invasion, all of which came true a month later.

Our meeting in Tel Aviv took place on the last day of 2022, shortly after Moscow Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt had publicly called on Russian Jews to flee Russia, as he had done after refusing to offer public support for the war. Khrzhanovsky showed up to our meeting wearing his habitual Moscow art world uniform of a black suit with a black scarf. I informed him that he looked like a Hasid. He replied that in a certain sense he is a Hasid. He ordered a Coca-Cola and I a glass of white wine, and we begin discussing our citizenship and passport situations—which is sadly what Russian Jews do now when they meet each other in Tel Aviv, Berlin, London, New York, and Paris.

Vladislav Davidzon: Let us begin with the obvious question. With the war continuing to rage, what is going to happen with the Babyn Yar Memorial Project?

Ilya Khrzhanovsky: The project was actually only just getting started. We had planned to build the biggest Holocaust memorial complex in all of Europe. We

should not compare the project, however with Auschwitz or any other memorial that is located in the places where those terrible events took place—that is, where there is still some material evidence of what transpired. Auschwitz was immediately preserved after the war—mothballed and frozen in time—in such a way that future generations could remember what took place. There are no traces left anywhere in Babyn Yar to remind us of what happened there.

We had planned for Babyn Yar to be a place where both Jews and non-Jews would come to contemplate the past, a place to which people would fly from all over the world specifically to have a chance to think about the example of the tragedy that happened there. To think about the history of the Holocaust and the place of Jews in Ukraine. To think about Jews generally. To think about themselves. About life and death. About the transience of life and the choices that we all have to make.

What will happen next is obviously completely unclear ...

V.D.: ... as unclear as it is significant.

I.K.: Babyn Yar will remain exactly the same in terms of the significance that it holds for the entire Jewish world. That is, all those objects and structures that had been built during my two-year-long tenure as director—the “pop-up Synagogue” in the form of a book, the field of mirrors, the crystal Wailing Wall made by Marina Abramovic—all of those structures remain and continue to work. People continue to visit the memorial.

Many of the objects we created had been criticized for being too abstract by specialists in the field of Holocaust memory. Yet the outbreak of the war has provided many of them with a completely different meaning. So now, the memorial is as much about the tragedy that is taking place right now as it is about the tragedy that took place in 1941. Because it is broadly about the inherent tragedy of the extermination of living beings in general. That which had been important primarily to the Jewish community has now become important for the wider Ukrainian community as well. Which I think is good and correct.

As of this moment, there are no

memorials to the current war yet in existence. It is a process that will require a tremendous amount of rethinking. And Babyn Yar itself will require a great deal of rethinking after all that has happened.

V.D.: Can the project move forward in the context of an ongoing war? Is that possible?

I.K.: Well, it is not moving forward now in the sense of developing any new artistic ideas or concepts. I do remain the artistic director.

V.D.: Will you be resigning from your post? Are you going anywhere?

I.K.: No. I am not going anywhere at the moment. But I will admit that I have practically nothing to do at the moment.

Now, the Babyn Yar Foundation remains engaged in several small projects. One of these is the effort to continue to archive historical documents—everything we have that is related to the Holocaust throughout the country. And this is very important work, even as the country is at war, which makes the work very difficult and sometimes even impossible.

Anna Furman, our deputy general director, is currently leading a project called “Martyrology.” It is a martyrology of all the civilian victims who have been killed in Ukraine. There are photographs, letters and videos that are being showcased. This is not merely a first name and family name being written down somewhere, it is much more like a virtual cemetery. By the way—the design work for the project received a Red Dot Award, which as you know is the highest award in the field of design. That is an example of an important project that has nothing to do with Jewish life specifically but with the work of memory in general.

Since our organization, the Babyn Yar Memorial Foundation, is the largest specialist in the field of memory in Ukraine, we considered it necessary for us to continue to do what we have always done with the past, but to do it now with the present. You know that the whole world now knows about the bombing of Babyn Yar [during the second week of the war].

It seems to me that in the first days of the war that attack meant something very important symbolically. It does

not really anymore. It is clear that the Russian Federation is now a fascist, Nazi-like country, so to speak. It is arguably even more terrible than Hitler’s Germany, because it relies on a far longer historical tradition to do what it is doing. That is, it relies on a 100-year-long experience of Soviet terror, which destroyed everything around it as well as everything inside of the country.

We had a short pause during Gorbachev’s perestroika and the Yeltsin years—there was this pause of 20 years and then once again everything turns to hell.

The world has never seen anything like this before. Why is that? Have we not seen worse or more destructive wars? Sure, we have. But never before has it been possible for one lone individual to threaten the destruction of the entire world. This is the first time in human history that this has happened. Therefore we have to understand this as a manifestation of pure evil. Perhaps even the ultimate evil. And the fact is that one of the first bombs during the war fell on the territory of Babyn Yar. The fact that a family with children was burned alive ...

V.D.: What can be done to salvage the project? What is to be done if, let’s say, the Ukrainians win the war in three months? Or six? If next week Putin has a heart attack?

I.K.: The project requires a huge rethinking. In one sense, the whole country has turned into Babyn Yar. Or is being turned into it.

If at the beginning of the war the Jewish community actively avoided comparing what is happening now in Ukraine to the Holocaust (which is correct, the comparison is inexact), it is now obvious that what is happening in Ukraine is pure genocide. An absolute genocide of a specific nation and its peaceful population. Which makes it very similar to the tragedy of the Holocaust.

The fact is that the genocide of the Ukrainian people and the tragedy of the Holocaust are woven into the history of Ukraine. Because what is happening now is the result of a 100-year history, at least, of Ukrainian relations with Russia. And the Holocaust is tightly woven into that story. Which of course requires

a rethinking by Ukrainian society of the composition of the supervisory board of directors of the Babyn Yar Foundation. It has clearly undergone terrible changes as international sanctions have been imposed on two of the sponsors of the project. Those sponsors have left, and new ones will have to be appointed.

I must engage in international relations for the project, to continue to keep those world-class cultural figures who were ready to participate in the project involved. But it will be Ukrainian society that will decide what to do with the history and with this project. And if Ukrainian society decides that it still needs me, I will be happy to continue to participate. For now, my task is simply to preserve what we had been doing before the war.

V.D.: Two of the four original primary founders of the project, the Ukrainian Jewish oligarchs German Khan and Mikhail Fridman, are currently under international sanctions. Fridman is now under arrest in the U.K. under suspicion of money laundering, while Khan has fled to Russia. A third founder of the project, Pavel Fuks, is now considered persona non grata in Ukraine because of certain things that he did, or allegedly did, in Kharkiv at the start of the war.

Let us talk about the technical matters, then. Are you still being paid by the project? Do you continue to take a salary? Do you still talk to Mr. Khan and Mr. Fridman?

I.K.: I have not received a salary since the start of the war. I voluntarily gave it up as soon as the war started.

I am still sometimes in touch with Mr. Fridman, for whom I have much respect, and I am very sorry that he is in the situation he is in now. I know how hard he worked on the Babyn Yar project and how important the project and his Jewish identity are for him, and I evaluate him based on that attitude. But what has happened, happened.

Neither Mr. Fridman nor Mr. Khan currently has anything to do with management or any other decisions that are made in the Babyn Yar Foundation, and naturally, they are no longer financing the project. Which is not to say that project is no longer active, Mr. Ronald

Lauder has recently become a major donor, for which we are very grateful.

But one must also understand that the Babyn Yar project is more than just the people who funded it or had worked on it at one time. We are building a big thing, our action plan spans centuries ...

V.D.: Yes, when we met for a drink at the Cannes Film Festival in the summer of 2021 you informed me that you were in fact “V.D.: building a blueprint for the pyramid” V.D.: for the first 50 years. This would only be the beginning ...

I.K.: Actually, at Cannes I told you that we were making a working plan for the first 100 years.

V.D.: My apologies. It was indeed the first 100 years.

It was important to me to outline how it should function for those first 100 years. One needs to make a plan and get it moving somehow. Of course, we did not assume in our worst nightmares that there would be a war, but we assumed that the world would change, in ways both concrete and abstract. With a plan of that sort, the project is of necessity bigger than any individual participant. It will have new sponsors and new artists long after my own work is done.

That said, I am certain that Babyn Yar is among the most important projects of my artistic life, and I will always be ready to contribute, whether that’s in my current capacity as artistic director or something else. I believe it is similarly significant for Mr. Fridman and Mr. Khan because they are personally connected to this tragedy through their family histories.

V.D.: Both men are Ukrainian-born Jews. Mr. Khan I think had 11 or 17 close relatives shot by the Nazis in Babyn Yar. Yet it seems that the arguments of their Ukrainian critics have turned out to be correct. The fact that they still had assets in Russia made them exposed to Putinism. They were also a liability to themselves because they still had relationships in Russia that had to do with their money. Is all of that not true?

I.K.: I don’t know the specific details of their activities in Russia, except for what everyone knows. They have huge businesses in Russia, but we must not forget that they have huge businesses in Ukraine as well. And in other countries,

“There is a terrible perversion of memory that is taking place in Russia, and any civilized person connected with Russia has a responsibility to fight against it.”

too. They made their fortunes in Russia, they moved from Russia to the wider world and the world economy.

I don’t know the details of their economic and political lives, but I do know that they treated and continue to treat Ukraine with great respect, and both men are experiencing these events as a personal tragedy. Fridman condemned the war initially, and while of course it’s always possible to say that he should have taken a stronger stance, I don’t think that’s any of my business. I think they both could have been bolder in their condemnations, but it is their life, their choice. And we all have to live with our own choices in the end. We do what we can. That said, I will always be grateful for what they did for the Babyn Yar Foundation. It’s like our Russian citizenships, which we were discussing earlier. In the first days of the war, my first instinct was to immediately renounce my Russian citizenship. But then I realized such a decision must be approached with caution. Despite the fact you and I have other citizenships, and have not lived there for many years, forfeiting a passport does not sever our connection to the “great Russian culture,” as they used to say. This culture is part of us, and we are responsible for this, no matter what citizenship we have.

V.D.: For the record, I burned my Russian passport at the start of the war in front of the Russian Embassy in Paris, and I thought you got rid of your Russian passport, too.

What is the future of relations between Ukrainian and Russian Jewry? Will it be war, or will it be Babyn Yar?

I.K.: When we talk about the Jews now, I think, first of all, that the civic position is important—that is, how are Jews positioned within the broader body politic. As you know Rabbi Pinkhas Goldschmidt, the former chief rabbi of Moscow, has issued a statement calling on Jews to leave Russia if they can, saying that the level of antisemitism in Russia is growing. By contrast, it’s obvious that in Ukraine, the Jewish community is civically Ukrainian. I myself have felt like a political Ukrainian, and like a Ukrainian Jew, for a long time, and this feeling has only grown stronger since the war. I understand that I am culturally connected to Russia, but I am also connected to Ukraine, because my mother was born in Ukraine, in Vinnytsia. Thank God, a few days before the Germans entered Vinnytsia, my grandfather sent the family to Tashkent on the last train.

V.D.: My family was also evacuated, part of them likewise from Vinnytsia. I ended up in America, you ended up in Israel and later London. We are both part of the broader, cosmopolitan, Jewish Russophone diaspora. But it seems to me that there is going to be a wider break between Ukrainian Jews and Russian Jews. Because Ukrainian Jews are going to become more Ukrainian, if only because of the V.D.: war, and Russian Jews ...

I.K.: I think the only chance for them is to be more Jewish than Russian. You know how many people have now left Russia and gone to Israel, it’s an enormous amount. You know how many Jewish people from very different areas keep moving to Israel. But I repeat, a person, even more so a Jewish person of Russian origin, cannot but be on the side of the Ukrainian people, who are being subjected to genocide. I think, in a sense, Ukrainians are now all Jews, in that they are experiencing the tragedy of the genocide of their people. In the

first days of the war, I spoke to Dozhd [an independent, Russian-language TV channel], calling on Russian people to take to the streets to protest in any way possible. The next day, Dozhd was shut down. But things were getting bad even before that, it started a few months before the war, when “Memorial,” a [Russian] NGO that spoke out about memory, was closed.

There is a terrible perversion of memory that is taking place in Russia, and any civilized person connected with Russia has a responsibility to fight against it. It doesn't matter what kind of passport you keep in your pocket. My father, a famous animation director, was one of the first to sign letters and speak out against the war. And now my parents, who are 82 and 83 years old, live in Israel, and they understand that they will never return to Russia. In my own case, I left the country many, many years ago, but if before I would visit, now I cannot imagine ever going back again.

V.D.: I am so glad to hear that your father signed all those letters, because I love *The Glass Harmonica*. It is one of cartoons I grew up with, and I'm glad I can still watch it with a clear conscience.

V.D.: Let's talk a little bit more about the technical issues related to the memorial. What do you think about President Zelensky? He supported you and supported the project all the way, right?

I.K.: Zelensky and especially the head of his administration, Andrii Yermak, have indeed been very supportive from the start. As a Jew, but above all, as the president of the country, Zelensky understands that Jewish history is also Ukrainian history, and vice versa. And now we see how many people of all ethnicities are fighting for Ukraine. They may have Russian, Jewish, or Tatar ancestry, but they are first and foremost Ukrainians. Zelensky is known now, deservedly, as a larger-than-life figure, a great hero. But in the conversations I've had with him personally, I was struck by what a decent guy he is. The cynicism one is so accustomed to in politicians is totally absent in him—he has a big heart.

At a recent meeting of the board,

Zelensky and Yermak reiterated their support for the project. One might ask, in these tragic times, what does the memory of Babyn Yar have to do with anything? But they understand that it is part of Ukrainian history, and, most importantly, that Ukrainian history is not going anywhere. And our focus is not exclusively on the past. Since the beginning of the war, we've been doing everything we can to aid Ukraine against Russian fascism. For example, we've been working with Patrick Dubois, an experienced researcher and author of *The Holocaust by Bullets*, to document Russian war crimes in Ukraine. **V.D.:** How do you feel now about Russian culture?

I.K.: Well, I was born within the paradigm of Russian culture, but also in the paradigm of world culture. I understand all the reactions of Ukrainians now to Russian culture and to the dominance of Russian monuments and street names and everything else. They have a point. Although, of course, the idea of closing Bulgakov's museum is, to put it mildly, strange for me. But this is not my business, it's the business of the Ukrainians and they have the right to do as they see fit. At the same time, we understand that Schiller, Goethe, and Thomas Mann are not responsible for Nazi Germany. The same is true of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.

I am also a Jew. We are a people historically accustomed to movement. Jews are part of the world culture, and they also absorb the culture of the countries they live in. Politically, I feel absolutely Ukrainian. My Jewishness is not for me, in the cultural sense, something that dictates my artistic expressions. But genetically, cultural codes are naturally all mixed up in me.

V.D.: Say the Ukrainians win the war and then say to you, “Thank you for your service, Ilya, but you are a Russian citizen and we want a Ukrainian citizen as a director of this project now.” What would you say to that?

I.K.: I would understand. It is for the Ukrainians to decide whether or not someone is involved with the project. But that decision will surely be based on their personality and political position, rather than on their passport

or nationality. The issue is, what sort of person are you? What is your position? What talents and skills do you have? The Ukrainian government will decide, but I am sure it will be based on criteria other than citizenship.


I still think that this project is an international one, and I also believe that Ukraine is becoming a more and more international country. There will be an influx of foreign artists, businessmen, and cultural figures who can come and help Ukrainians build their country in the way they decide. I didn't come to Ukraine as a Russian citizen. I came to Kyiv as an Israeli citizen, and I applied for a work permit as an Israeli citizen.

V.D.: Your Ukrainian residence permit is not on your Russian passport but on your Israeli passport? And you want to be identified now not as a Russian but as an Israeli?


I.K.: Yes. I am a Russian-born, Israeli-German, British-Ukrainian artist, you know? I had an Israeli passport before the war and I left Russia way before the war. I probably should remind you that my first film, *Four*, was the first movie to be banned in Russia after the USSR collapsed!

V.D.: That's awesome.

I.K.: It's true. And then half a year later they formally gave permission to screen, but the film was only shown

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in a few cinemas, never on TV. And *Dau* was banned, it was never shown in Russia at all. I sued the Ministry of Culture from abroad over all this, which was of course useless.

V.D.: It has been several years since the V.D.: DAU project and all the attendant controversies. How do you look back at the way that Ukrainian society reacted to your participation in DAU and what that could mean for Babyn Yar two years on?

I.K.: I believe that Ukrainian society was being manipulated at that time by a number of Ukrainian oligarchs and some people I will not name. A campaign was orchestrated across certain TV channels, in certain print outlets, to shape perceptions of the project. In particular, a criminal case alleging the torture of children was brought against me in connection with the film *Degeneration*. That film was a Milgram experiment-esque parable that examined the mechanisms through which Nazism comes to power and the ways in which it manifests in every person who supports it. That's to say I have reason to believe that some Ukrainian figures did not want me to helm the Babyn Yar project, not because they objected to my Russian origins, but because of their personal interests. Many people for whom I have great respect opposed my vision for the project without even seeing it. But time will tell.

It seems to me that the importance of DAU has grown tremendously. Right now, I am actually working on another original film within the DAU project, which is not yet released. We're designing the set now.

V.D.: *Dau* actually exists? Landau actually exists as a film?

I.K.: It's not *Landau*, it's *Dau*. It is inspired by the story of Lev Landau, but it is not a precise biopic. We aim to finish production in late 2023 or early 2024. But as a project, DAU is even more important now because it tells us how totalitarian machines are born and how they change people. It depicts the consciousness and the Soviet and Russian trauma that led the world to the nightmare in which we are now living.

How modern people adapt and how they instantly become part of a

totalitarian machine that destroys all life—this is what DAU is about.

V.D.: [The director tells a story about meeting a famous American counterpart in a bar in Tel Aviv the night before the war started.]

I.K.: A messaging campaign was sorely needed. Zelensky recorded his famous appeal to Russian soldiers that same night. My wife suggested that one more appeal be recorded, based on Chaplin's monologue from the film *The Great Dictator*. The president's office liked the idea and we put a draft together, but the war started that same morning. As you remember, in *The Great Dictator* the hero is a Jew, and Zelensky is also a Jew. That the Jews are now fighting the monster of our historical moment, that puffy Botox-faced criminal Putin, is something we should all be proud of. By the way, Yermak is also a Jew.

V.D.: As is the Ukrainian defense minister, Oleksii Reznikov. It is amazing, this war of Jews against "V.D.: Russian Nazis" V.D.: —I wrote about it as early as March. Sadly for the sake of history, and art, the Jewish Ukrainian Volodymyr never got to deliver the Charlie Chaplin monologue.

I.K.: No, because it was just too late. On Feb. 24 we all found ourselves living in a completely different world.

In the Soviet Union they used to say, "No one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten." That's never been more true. Technologically, the world is now such that none of those who committed crimes will escape responsibility. None of those who supported the war or supported this regime will escape responsibility. We are working on Babyn Yar using modern technologies, together with Maxim Rokhmaniyko, head of the Center for Spatial Technologies, who now works with Edem Vaisman from Forensic Architecture, he moved to Germany, he is a wonderful Ukrainian. All the war criminals in Russia and all those who support the regime will be named.

V.D.: I think so too. We all have to do our small part. Glory to Ukraine!

Glory to the heroes. ■

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Let's All Celebrate Norman Mailer

The most swaggering and macho of Jewish writers illuminated postwar America like no one else

BY DAVID MIKICS

Today would have been the 100th birthday of the greatest American voice of the '60s, and the most truly American Jewish writer.

Norman Mailer was born on Jan. 31, 1923, in Long Branch, New Jersey. His mother gave him the Hebrew name Melech: king. She was prophetic. For decades, Norman Kingsley Mailer ruled the literary world. No writer was more famous in his day than the pugilistic Mailer—a colossus on the New York literary scene, author of bestselling novels, a frequent guest on TV talk shows and a high-profile reporter for glossy magazines. At his frequent best, he illuminated postwar America like no other writer.

These days Mailer's macho bluster, sexist gibes, and ferocious ego offend contemporary sensibilities. May his name be blotted out! But Mailer amply deserved his stardom. He could be crude, silly, or even brutal, but more often he hit his targets. Mailer told hard truths about male violence, fought against conformity, and denounced the nightmare reign of technology. By embracing the twinned ideas of God and unreason that constitute the nuclear core of humanity, he drew upon a mighty source of energy that was simply not available to his more modern, right-thinking, constipated peers.

Mailer hung out with the Beats in the '50s, took his place among the New York intellectuals in the '60s, and cavorted with celebrities. He tried to punch McGeorge Bundy at Truman Capote's Black and White Ball, ran for mayor of

New York, and directed some crappy, jerry-built movies. (The best of them, *Maidstone*, is memorable mostly for the scene where Rip Torn attacks Mailer with a hammer.) For decades he lived among the bohemian riff-raff in Provincetown, and he wrote a peculiarly lurid mystery novel set there, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

Mailer was one of the earliest and loudest opponents of the Vietnam War. He drew our attention to the barbaric conditions in America's prisons. He condemned the public housing projects that turned Black neighborhoods into urban hellscapes. He warned against "the cold majesty of the Corporation," which has now taken over our world, turning human problems into algorithms and personal identity into a consumer choice.

Mailer spearheaded the New Journalism, where the reporter's ego strides into the limelight. No one but Mailer could have given us such diamond-hard portraits of American politicians, from Barry Goldwater and Eugene McCarthy to Mayor Daley. He knew their faces, their manners, and their inner tensions like no one else. He reported on political conventions, moon landings and heavyweight boxing, and wrote about Picasso, Marilyn Monroe, and graffiti artists. His portrait of JFK, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," helped Kennedy win the 1960 election, or so Mailer thought.

In his rapturous mode, Mailer produced cascading depictions of the Chicago stockyards, the hippies at the Pentagon, and, late in his career, the orgies and mystical rites of the Egyptian pharaoh's court in *Ancient Evenings*, an epic queer fiction that melds together sex, magic,

religion, and politics. His writing mirrored his life, and vice versa. By the end of his life Mailer had been married six times and had nine children. He was a family man who was also a very busy writer and a highly practiced adulterer. In his brazen way, he could be unusually self-reflective, putting his shortcomings on display in a way that is foreign to today's self-righteous polemicists.

Mailer first made his name at the age of 25, in 1946, with his WWII novel *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer had been in combat, briefly, in the Pacific. The novel is flawed, with a clumsy structure and too many characters. But Mailer has a sharp eye for the exhausting rituals of wartime, the endless hauling of heavy machines through the jungle, the swollen corpses of the Japanese enemy. Near the end of the book, Mailer becomes an expert satirist. He shows how the American military brass prize a cold mastery that damages the soul. A few years later Mailer would look for an antidote to the rigidity and repression he saw all around him in the conformist '50s, which was forecast by the novel's sadistic General Cummings.

The Library of America has just reissued *The Naked and the Dead*, an edition that includes a selection of letters Mailer wrote to his first wife during the war. Many of the letters are revelatory. On Aug. 8, 1945, he reacted to the news of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. Mailer the trudging, wearied army soldier shared little, he said, with bomber pilots, devoted as they were to the machine:

Flyers are the same way as sailors. They fight too in an abstract way in an abstract fluid. Their lives are also comfortable, lonely and horny, and again death is the devastating, incomprehensible thunder clap. Those are lives with no other stench than the smell of gas and metal and lubricating oil. They do not know that latrines and bodies and swamps are something hard to differentiate.

And the personification they give their machines nauseates me. It is the substitute for the loneliness and horniness, but it is also so frightening. *We*

have come to the age when we love machines and hate women. The next step is religious awe, and the atom bomb looks like the last deity, the final form line of entelechy.

Mailer loved to provoke. He was overconfident, vainglorious, and a boaster, but also troubled by his unruly impulses and ideas. He expressed the trouble in his fiction, where he gave the unruliness full rein.

Take Sergius O'Shaugnessy, the hero of Mailer's early story "The Time of Her Time" (1959), who is determined to give his Jewish girlfriend an orgasm. He finally pushes her over the edge by saying into her ear, "You dirty little Jew." But the story is really about the cracks in the masculine ego. The girl has the last word. At the end of the story, as she leaves Sergius, she says to him, "You do nothing but run away from the homosexual that is you." Mailer's Sergius praises her for this wounding thrust: "And like a real killer, she did not look back, and was out the door before I could rise to tell her that she was a hero fit for me."

Mailer's actual response when called a homosexual was considerably more agitated. On Nov. 19, 1960, Mailer threw a party. He had planned to announce his candidacy for mayor that night, but it didn't work out that way. Instead he got so blind drunk that, someone said, he didn't even know his own name. He kept going out into the street and picking fights with strangers. Back in the apartment, his second wife, Adele Morales, told Mailer he was a "faggot." And so he drew a penknife and stabbed her twice, close to the heart.

Adele always said that Mailer had stabbed her during a psychotic break. He spent 17 days in Bellevue. But he refused to plead insanity. The assault, he knew, was his "offense against God." He worked out what that meant in his later books about violent men, notably *The Executioner's Song* (1979), his largest masterpiece, which like the best of his writing was a work of nonfiction.

Those who visit Mailer's attic study in his Provincetown home ascend a flight of rickety stairs to the small desk where

"Back in the apartment, his second wife, Adele Morales, told Mailer he was a 'faggot.' And so he drew a penknife and stabbed her twice, close to the heart."

he did his writing. Even in his final days, when he used two canes, Mailer climbed the stairs to sit down to work. (Michael Lennon, Mailer's biographer and friend, movingly evokes this period in his recent book *Mailer's Last Days*.) On the wall by the staircase hangs a sign: "Bellevue," where Mailer spent three weeks after the stabbing. He never forgot the results of his reckless violence.

Mailer was not just exhibiting maleness in his work, as critics often charged. He was also showing the costs that masculinity exacts. At times, though, he celebrated aggression, as in his 1957 essay, "The White Negro," which became a Beat scripture.

The style of "The White Negro" can be clotted and overheated—Mailer was apparently taking speed when he wrote it—but the essay is a true child of the Emersonian tradition. Like Emerson, Mailer denounces soul-killing conformity. The '50s were awash with "the wrong kind of defeats," which, Mailer says, "attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage."

Striking back at the Eisenhower era's death-in-life was the hipster, who has a psychopath's jittery energy and is able

to use it creatively, "set[ting] out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self."

The heroic image of the Black street criminal in "The White Negro" was applauded by the likes of Eldridge Cleaver, whom Mailer helped free from prison. But here Mailer got things wrong. Black jazz musicians, not inner city thugs, supplied the models of African American style taken up by the Beats.

In "The White Negro" Mailer wrote,

Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can ever saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk.

Here Mailer romanticizes and misleads. Not every Black person lived on the edge, even in the 1950s. Some of them lived in the suburbs.

Mailer explored the ecstatic unleashing that violence supplies in the lurid hardboiled novel *An American Dream* (1965), acclaimed by Joan Didion and Germaine Greer. Mailer depicts a wife murderer who gets away with it. Not only that, he buggers the German maid—a reflection of Mailer's experience in Berlin, where he was able to celebrate his victory over a German prostitute who was so enthused about his sexual powers that she refused to take money from him.

An American Dream, full of swash-buckling Mailerian rhapsodies, reads

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like a Jim Thompson pulp fiction dressed up for a fancy dinner. One critic called it “a wild battering ram of a novel,” and so it is. When Stephen Rojack, the hero, murders his wife, Mailer’s book vibrates with perverse, terrible exhilaration. But in the end the novel’s action is too over the top, the dream too absurd. Both sublime and silly, *An American Dream* is a tour de force that defeats critical judgment.

Perhaps no other great novelist has produced such conspicuously bad books side by side with his great ones. *The Deer Park* is a misfired fable of Hollywood where every character seems bloated and unreal. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a near-unreadable hash. The narrator’s Texan slang sounds irritatingly fake, and though it poses as savage and satirical, the novel seems merely ridiculous. Mailer was always best when he drew directly from life. His purely fictional characters seldom convince the reader.

Mailer was a rebel by nature. After attending Mailer’s 1962 debate with William F. Buckley Jr., the 25-year-old Abbie Hoffman wrote that Buckley stood for “all the rah-rah baloney, the genteel and gentile power structure ... Buckley represented the empire, and Mailer was challenging the empire as a hip ethnic street fighter. That was extremely appealing to me.”

But Mailer had deep criticisms of the counterculture, and they were good ones. Reporting on the Yippie uproar in Chicago’s Lincoln Park during the 1968 Democratic convention, Mailer knew that such a barbaric yawp could never get very far, because it terrified the American burghers who needed order and security. Lured by the Yippies’ wild energy, Mailer also felt threatened by it.

Mailer saw into the deep fissures of ’60s America. Some of these divisions are still here today, like the one between a progressive, college-educated elite and

“Mailer explained the late ’60s better than anyone, because he knew the actions of the radicals were foolish as well as profound.”

an underclass that cares far more about bread-and-butter issues than about the involuted theorizing of elites. He saw how ferociously white working-class America hated the hippies who opposed the Vietnam War. There was a huge gulf in experience between the working class and the university-bred student protesters, who had never fired a gun, fixed a car, or gotten into a fight over a girl.

Mailer explained the late ’60s better than anyone, because he knew the actions of the radicals were foolish as well as profound. He wrote two books on the clash between the antiwar youth and middle America: *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, his report on the 1968 political conventions.

Even as he griped about Women’s Liberation, Mailer admitted he had been schooled by the women. *The Prisoner of Sex*, which sparked a sensation when it appeared in the pages of *Harpers* in 1971, displays an unexpected regard for feminist insight. The male conceit that men were tough and women weak and sentimental, Mailer knew, was a total fraud. Women walking down the street, Mailer realized, were starkly exposed to the eyes of men, and, he confessed, “any man feeling so stripped of his skin

would be suffering an unholy mix of narcissism and paranoia.”

Town Bloody Hall, that grand hoot of a documentary by D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, shows the outnumbered Mailer squaring off against a passel of feminist firebrands. The lioness in the pack was Germaine Greer, who told the press that she had come to debate Mailer because she wanted to sleep with him (“I’d really like to help that man”). Mailer turned down the rock-star gorgeous Greer, perhaps out of fear.

Mailer argued that the feminist avant garde technologizes women, reducing the mysteries of sex to an engineering puzzle. Ti-Grace Atkinson wanted to free women from the womb—she hoped that babies could be made in test tubes. For Mailer this was technology trying to rule human nature. He rejected the outsourcing of sex, since for him eros was a confrontation between a pair of live human beings.

In *The Executioner’s Song*, Mailer honed in on the dance of sex and death through the stormy relationship between a killer and his girlfriend. Here he measured the damage done by the rebel stance he had earlier touted and fantasized about. Gary Gilmore’s rebelliousness is dismal and doomed, and leads to two senseless murders. But when sent back to prison he deepens. Gilmore’s letters to his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, which Mailer quotes at length, astonish us with—it must be said—their wisdom. Nicole, a tough, fascinating woman, is just as fully drawn as Gary.

Like Mailer, Gilmore believes in reincarnation, and says he is paying a debt from a past life. His demand to be executed makes him a figure of some nobility, and the night before he faces the firing squad is not unlike the Last Supper. Yet we never forget Gilmore’s evil, whose roots seem obscure both to him and to the reader.

Written in a spare style that continues for over 1,000 pages, *The Executioner’s Song* builds on itself, offering a panoramic view of hundreds of characters. Mailer dignifies even the most minor-key or benighted people, letting us hear each voice separately—the book is a symphony of free indirect style. In *The Executioner’s Song*, Mailer



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achieved a Tolstoy-like equanimity. His characters get their due, all of them. For once, Mailer himself doesn't appear in the book.

Mailer called *The Executioner's Song*, which won the Pulitzer, a "true-life novel." *Oswald's Tale* (1995) is a companion piece, also with a large cast of characters surrounding the killer. Mailer gives us Oswald through the eyes of his wife, Marina, whose story occupies much of the book, but we also get a strong taste of how Oswald saw himself. Disillusioned with both Russia and the U.S., Oswald wanted to promote his own eccentric third way, neither capitalism nor communism. So he decided to kill the president, thinking this cataclysmic act would shake the world and draw people to his homemade ideology. Oswald acted alone, says Mailer, though Jack Ruby did not—Mailer argues that Ruby obeyed Mafia directives when he killed Oswald.

When he murdered JFK, Oswald damaged America's being, and he did it for an insanely self-aggrandizing purpose. The wound remains open to this day.

Oswald was the opposite of Gilmore, an ideologue rather than a spiritual seeker, and so completely unable to think of himself as guilty. Like Hitler or Lenin, Oswald believed he was the heroic catalyst for a new era, but he was just the victim of his own delusion. Mailer's Gilmore, by contrast, was a thinker, though he never faced the true depth of his guilt. With Gilmore, a disturbingly real hero-villain, Mailer presented a riposte to all the outlaws and rebels celebrated by American culture, who are mere thrilling fictions next to the thing itself, the killer who decided to die for his crimes.

While writing *The Executioner's Song* Mailer became tragically involved with a prisoner who had started writing to him, Jack Henry Abbott. Impressed by Abbott's writing, Mailer helped free him from jail—or so he thought—and found him a publisher. (Mailer didn't know that Abbott had actually been let out because he snitched on a fellow inmate.)

On one singular weekend in 1981, Abbott's much-heralded book about prison life, *In the Belly of the Beast*, landed on

the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, while Abbott murdered a young waiter in the East Village. I was a few blocks away at the time, an undergraduate at NYU, where I had just read *The Executioner's Song* for an English class. One of my closest friends knew Richard Adan, the waiter that Abbott killed. Mailer's plea that Abbott be given a light sentence for his crime was a grave error, based on his mistaken sense that Abbott the writer had a higher claim than the public that needed to be protected from him. The Abbott affair continued to plague Mailer, who believed he shared the guilt for Abbott's release and his murder.

Mailer has not usually been seen as a Jewish writer. He said many times that his stint in the army allowed him to escape his middle-class, nice boy, Jewish upbringing. But while writing for the *Village Voice*, the ultimate American Jewish publication which Mailer founded with Dan Wolf, Mailer became a fan of Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, and later on he acquired a Soncino Talmud. Introducing his novel about Jesus, *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), Mailer remarked that Jesus was "extremely Jewish. He worries all the time, he anticipates, he broods upon what's going on, there's an immense sense of responsibility." Mailer's profoundly anxious and aware Jesus is the antithesis of his Oswald, the psychopath who never doubted his grandiose, rash impulses.

According to Judaism, Mailer writes, you never get rescued by God "without paying something in return," an idea that harmonizes with Mailer's belief in karma and reincarnation. Remembering what you owe cuts against the belief in bold action and carefree daring so ingrained in American myth, and the trust in hipster originality that Mailer started with in "The White Negro." Mailer now argued that you can't make yourself up anew or cut yourself free of the past.

Mailer called himself a left conservative, and with this, too, he argued against the grain in a particularly Jewish way. During his quixotic campaign for mayor of New York City in 1969 (endorsed by Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem!) Mailer advocated seceding from New York state, banning cars from Manhattan, and

"compulsory free love in neighborhoods that vote for it." He sketched his left conservative philosophy: "Speaking from the left, it says a city cannot survive unless the poor are recognized, until their problems are underlined as not directly of their own making." And from the right, Mailer argued, "Man must have the opportunity to work out his own destiny, or he will never know the dimensions of himself, he will be alienated from any sense of whether he is acting for good or evil." The social system has damaged people, Mailer knew, but every person, no matter how disadvantaged, must "work out his own destiny," using personal courage alone.

Courage was a key value for Mailer. Courage meant the strength to take risks, including physical ones. Mailer saw how boxers incarnated courage. Men had died in the the ring, and Mailer was at ringside during the fatal knock out of Benny Paret, the most famous ring death in boxing. His admiration for Muhammad Ali was immense. Ali, then Cassius Clay, stepped into the ring with Sonny Liston, the most frightening man in boxing, and years later Ali in Zaire decided, maybe at the last minute, Mailer thought, to go for the rope-a-dope against George Foreman, the hardest puncher on the planet.

Where the great boxers staked their bodies, Mailer's courage was intellectual and moral (as was Ali's, too, he knew). Testing others and himself, and frequently picking fights, Mailer struggled honestly. He stuck to his ideas about America and the world, about men and women, in the face of counterarguments from the left and the right, without ever losing his will or abandoning the fight. He was of nobody's party but his own—and ours. Let's celebrate him. ■

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SPORTS

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OY, A.I.

To preserve our human reality, we must make our new technologies more like the Talmud

BY JARON LANIER

You are reading a Jewish take on artificial intelligence. Normally I would not start a piece with a sentence like that, but I want to confuse the bots that are being asked to replicate my style, especially the bots I work on.

It used to be that we'd gather our writings in a library, then everything went online. Then it got searchable and people collaborated anonymously to create Wikipedia entries. With what is called "AI" circa 2023 we now use programs to mash up what we write with massive statistical tables. The next word Jaron Lanier is most likely to place in this sentence is calabash. Now you can ask a bot to write like me.

My attitude is that there is no AI. What is called AI is a mystification, behind which there is the reality of a new kind of social collaboration facilitated by computers. A new way to mash up our writing and art.

But that's not all there is to what's called AI. There's also a fateful feeling about AI, a rush to transcendence. This faux spiritual side of AI is what must be considered first.

As late as the turn of the 21st century, a nerdy, commercial take on computer technology was that it was the one public good everyone could agree on. Like today, liberals and conservatives fought with seemingly supernatural venom. But we all agreed it was great when kids learned to program and computers got faster.

These days, a lot of us are mad at Big Tech, including me, and I've been at the center of it for decades. But at the same time, the part of us that loves the tech has gotten way more intense and

worshipful. Is there a contradiction? Welcome to humanity.

We all want to forget, but last year, 2022, was deluged by a craze for Web3 and NFTs. If you aren't sure what Web3 and NFTs were all about, please be assured that at the time no one was sure what they were either. Web3 was a vague movement that included NFTs; NFTs were sort of like online trading cards with online digital signatures.

I frequently found myself trying to dissuade people from buying NFTs in 2022. They were often working folks without a lot of money to spare. When I would try to explain that only a very few, very early people made those fortunes you hear about, that by now there's no one left to buy your NFT for more than you paid; when I said those things they looked back at me like cult members, eyes full of hope. Sure, people have been falling for get-rich-quick schemes forever, but this was something more. There was also religion. NFTs were a cross between a lottery and the prosperity gospel, which holds that wealth and godliness are the same thing. When I tried to save people from getting ripped off it was as if I was attacking their religion. They weren't angry; they pitied me.

It's not just victims of NFT scams. Tech billionaires can get that same look in their eyes. I even get it once in a while. We are looking to technology as religion.

It's a species of religion that is thrill-seeking and impatient. Sure, we'll get rich quick, but that's not all. We'll transcend. This can mean physical immortality, according to some, or moving from a world of people to a world of superintelligent AI entities. We'll be uploaded and become parts of AIs. The thrill we anticipate can mean escaping

finitude in its many forms. Infinite resources and abundance for everyone. I am not exaggerating. These are typical aspirations expressed within tech culture. And it's all said to be near at hand. A common idea is that we don't have to worry about something like climate change because if we just build a smart enough AI, then that AI will fix the climate and everything else.

Or else AI is about to consume humanity, as is so often depicted in the movies. A lot of charity in the tech world has been diverted into nonprofits that attempt to prevent AI from killing us all. Since I don't think AI is a thing, only a new social mashup scheme, I find these efforts to be unintelligible.

A curious correlate is a lack of interest in what AI is for, meaning solving any problem smaller than the giant existential ones. (Software tools are essential for the big problems, especially some of the kinds that differ from mashup AI, like scientific simulations.)

The response to a relatively simple and early AI chatbot called ChatGPT has been huge, consuming newspaper space and news feeds, and yet there is hardly ever a consideration for how it might be fruitfully applied. Instead, we seem to want to be endlessly charmed, frightened, or awed. Is this not a religious response?

Why do we seek that feeling? Why do we seek it in tech lately?

AI is the only scientific project defined by theatrical criteria. Alan Turing proposed in his famous Turing test that the measure of AI is whether people find it indistinguishable from human displays of intelligence. In other words, fooling a human into believing that a computer is a person is the test. People love to fool each other. Theatrics become indistinguishable from hypothetical objective quality. ChatGPT, for instance, was similar in power to other programs that had previously been available, but the chat experience was more theatrical. Suddenly the experience was a huge deal.

Humans can only perceive the world imperfectly, and we seek advantages over one another by screwing with one another's perception. It is the most ancient game. And yet, enough reality has

come in through the cracks over the centuries that we humans have been able to have science and technology, and to make decent societies in which life has gotten better overall. We don't need to perceive reality all the time, but enough of the time.

There is much concern in the tech world about what is usually called imminent "reality collapse" or "the existential crisis." Soon, you won't know if anything you read, or any image or video clip you see, came from a real person, a real camera, or anything real at all. It will become cheaper to show fakes than to show reality. A fake will only require that you enter a sentence asking for it, while reality will demand showing up with a camera. No comparison. We must now invent systems to avoid a complete descent into self-destructive, insane societies, but there is so much work to do. We have set ourselves a tight timeline.

There is a great deal of comment on how AI will disrupt this or that, like pronouncements that the college essay is now dead, but what is AI (specifically the mashup kind which is driving public obsession) good for? If you're curious, I believe the new AI programs will turn out to be useful, but we need to experiment. We'll know once we discover.

But we don't need to know more in order to have that religious feeling. Why the drive to bring the new AI programs on so quickly? It is an imperative. To even ask the question in the tech world brings on those disbelieving stares.

Jewish traditions can be useful in these times. We humans are often consumed by a fetish for seemingly transcendent baubles, for golden calves. The problem wasn't that Israelites wanted to craft a calf, but that they worshipped it, even though it was a thing they had just made. The calf was social narcissism and amnesia. Jews have always had a problem of getting bored, of not getting enough of a charge from whatever is going on. The Israelites waiting for Moses to come back down were bored enough to go nuts.

We people, not just Jews, still make golden calves all the time. Adam Smith's invisible hand, corporations-as-persons, the Chinese Communist Party, Wikipedia, the latest AI programs. All the same.

"The problem wasn't that Israelites wanted to craft a calf, but that they worshipped it, even though it was a thing they had just made."

All a bunch of people being subsumed to create an imaginary superhero.

Human aggregations like these can be useful sometimes, but can also fail and become inhumane. (I like the Chinese Communist Party the least of all the ones on the list, but we must admit how many people have recently been brought out of poverty, while remembering how many had been starved just before. Similarly, corporations have earned the criticisms directed at them by—for just one example—making it harder to address climate change.)

The best way to make a human aggregation worse is to worship it. Smashing the golden calf and forcing the population into a generation of penance is one response, but Jewish tradition offers another idea that is more applicable to our times.

The Talmud was perhaps the first accumulator of human communication into an explicitly compound artifact, the prototype for structures like the Wikipedia, much of social media, and AI systems like ChatGPT. There is a huge difference, however. The Talmud doesn't hide people. You can see differing human perspectives within the compound object. Therefore, the Talmud is not a golden calf.

For those who don't know, the Talmud is an ancient document in which

successive generations have added comments in a unique layout on the page that identifies who is commenting. The Talmud is based on a beginning that is perceived as divine, but the elaboration is perceived as human. That's a great way to spur arguments about interpretation—meaning a great way to be Jewish.

Why is Wikipedia designed to hide people and to create a perspective from nowhere, as if there was only one truth? When encyclopedias were on paper, they announced a perspective. *Britannica* or *Americana*, for instance. This is an example of anticipation of AI. People have wanted the golden calf for a long time. We constructed Wikipedia as a singular oracle in which contributors are generally hidden, even though there was no practical reason to demand this.

There are many such anticipations. Popular TV and movies are increasingly mashups that might as well have been ordered up by AI. A recent show called *Wednesday*, based on *The Addams Family*, which I liked, was also like *Buffy*, *Harry Potter*, the *Marvel Universe* series, and many, many other previous shows and films. Mashups are easier to fund and promote. Similarly: While it's true that students might ask a bot to write an essay for school now in a way that was not common a month ago, it was only a month ago when they were trading ways to mash up essays pilfered online; a method that required only slightly more work but was otherwise similar. Fake news and deepfake images existed before the latest AI programs, though they just got much easier and faster to produce well.

At least with the new mashup AI (that's my term; usual terms are "generative" or "prompt-based" AI), a user can get a bunch of different versions of whatever is asked for and choose among them. In a way, that means there is sometimes a little more choice and expression in using the programs than in using the anticipatory methods that came just before.

Much has been said about people losing economic value in a world where their efforts can be simulated cheaply. This applies obviously to writers and artists, but will also apply to skilled labor like road repair or body shops when

robots show up, and they will. The problem is not just economic, but spiritual. If a person is not valued economically in a market-oriented society, then they are not valued in a profound way. If we expect people to sit around feeling useless while waiting for the largesse of tech titans, then we should expect an awful lot of smashing in short order.

The rhetoric of antisemitism and other forms of hate has lately included expressions of fears of replacement. “The Jews will not replace us.” Maybe part of that ancient cliché has been repurposed to express a fear of modernity itself. Maybe it has been like that for a while.

The clear path to make the situation better, to avoid reality collapse and a sense of looming human obsolescence, is to make our new technologies more like the Talmud. There is no reason to hide the people.

There is no reason to hide which

artists were the primary sources when a program synthesizes new art. Indeed, why can't people become proud, recognized, and wealthy by becoming ever-better providers of examples to make AI programs work better? Why can't our society still be made of humans?

We have no way to understand the world in an entirely rational, perfect way. There will always be seams. Mathematics cannot be complete and consistent, as Gödel showed, and physics is still split by a schism between quantum mechanics and relativity. Economics is still not reliably predictable, and perhaps will never be perfected. Relationships still go bad, no matter how much therapy and work the parties put in.

As Leonard Cohen put it, “there's a crack in everything; that's where the light gets in.” We have the remarkable

power to nudge where the crack resides, but we cannot get rid of it. (Seeing that there is a crack is absolutely different from filling that crack with superstitions. Accepting mystery is how you get out of magical thinking.)

That transcendent patch can either be positioned around get-rich-quick schemes, tech visions, or other golden calves, or we can find it in the mysteriousness of the person—of human life and of its efforts. We can accept that the way people have the magical, transcendent experience of experience is verifiable within ourselves, but must be treated as a matter of faith in each other.

The Talmud positions the mysteriousness in a way we can live with. That people have perspectives is the mystery of the universe. It is divine. ■

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COMMUNITY

The Dogs of War

Rudolphina Menzel's canine contributions to the British military campaign in WWII

BY LEA LEHAVI

Rudolphina Menzel (née Waltuch, 1891-1973) was a Viennese-born Jewish scientist whose pioneering research on canine psychology, development, and behavior fundamentally shaped the ways dogs came to be trained, cared for, and understood. Between the world wars, Menzel was known all over Europe as one of the foremost researchers on canine cognition

as well as among the most famous breeders and trainers of police dogs. Throughout the 1920s and until the Nazis seized power in 1933, she was a sought-after consultant at Kummersdorf, the German military dog training institute near Berlin. In 1938 she escaped Nazi-occupied Austria and moved to Palestine, where she established the Palestine Research Institute for Canine Psychology and Training and trained hundreds of dogs to serve alongside Jewish forces in the 1948 war. In the 1950s, she created the first guide-dog institute in the Middle East and invented Israel's national dog breed, the Canaan dog. In 1962 at the age of 71, she was appointed associate professor of animal psychology at Tel Aviv University,

where she maintained an active research agenda almost until the day she died.

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FOOD

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an active research agenda almost until the day she died.

During World War II, Rudolphina Menzel played a significant role in the Allied war effort by training mine-detecting dogs for the British army's use on the North African front. The Allied forces faced considerable challenges in North Africa, where the Germans had been laying hundreds of thousands of land mines since 1939. As the fighting intensified there in the early 1940s, the British had already exhausted their canine reserves on the European front and found themselves with a deficit of mine-detecting dogs.

In June 1942, a meeting of high-ranking British officers was held under the auspices of the British Mandate's Veterinary Services Department, which was in charge of all the animals in Palestine. The officers discussed the urgent need for mine-detecting dogs in North Africa and agreed that every effort should be made to train and purchase them as soon as possible. Knowing that Rudolphina was an expert in training dogs to detect mines, they appealed to her for help. Rudolphina in turn consulted with Moshe Sharett, Director of the Jewish Agency's Foreign Affairs Department, to seek his approval before taking any action.

The proposed cooperation between Yishuv leaders and the British was not without its difficulties. On the one hand, as colonial subjects of the mandatory regime in Palestine, leaders of the Yishuv were not eager to help the British. On the other hand, many in the Yishuv wanted to help the Allied forces in their fight against the Nazis. As a compromise, Sharett imposed a condition on the British request: the British must promise not to use the dogs Rudolphina trained for the war effort against Jews in the Yishuv.

With Sharett's blessing, Rudolphina began selling war dogs to the British in the summer of 1942; Sharett granted Rudolphina full authority to manage negotiations on canine matters with the British and deferred completely to her exclusive judgment. The British appointed a special officer to serve as an official liaison between Rudolphina and the British Army,

Colonel E. N. Newman Roger. The Colonel subsequently corresponded and met with Rudolphina often to discuss recruitment and training, as did his deputy, the head of the military police in Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

On July 10, 1942, the first cohort of sixty dogs was ready to be transferred from Palestine to the British Army's animal unit, located on the outskirts of Cairo in Almaza. Of these, twenty-two dogs were fully operational; the rest were still in training. By early 1943, dozens of dogs were being transported by the British Army's No. 3 Remount Squadron from Palestine to Almaza on a monthly basis. From there, the dogs were deployed all over the North African front.

From April 2, 1943, until the end of the war, weekly reports on the number of dogs purchased by the British and their conditions were received by the Veterinary Department of the Mandate government. An April 1943 report noted that twenty war dogs were purchased in Haifa and were described as "in good condition." Though Rudolphina's name is not mentioned, it is clear from the description that they were purchased from her kennel in Haifa. A report from May 1943 recorded the purchase of thirty-nine dogs and mentioned that the availability of high-quality Boxers remained good and that "breeding is carried out more extensively now ... it is anticipated that there will be no difficulty in purchasing dogs in the future in large numbers." A December 1943 entry noted that "four dogs—three Boxers and one Alsatian—were purchased from Dr. R. Menzel Kiryat Motzkin." Rudolphina's name appears in all subsequent reports on dog purchases. Though the war diaries mention occasional single dog purchases from individual private breeders, those were unusual.

Rudolphina's institute faced dire financial challenges during World War II, and she desperately needed money to care for and train her dogs. The relationship Rudolphina established with the British was therefore mutually beneficial: they benefitted from her highly trained dogs, and her institute benefitted from the income generated by their sale.

The British Army ultimately deployed over four hundred mine-detecting dogs trained by Rudolphina or according to

her methods, and the British war diaries recorded British soldiers of all ranks praising the heroism and excellence of these dogs. One of the officers reportedly remarked that the only disadvantage of the dogs was the fact that they couldn't get more of them. Articles in the *Palestine Post* also extolled the virtues of these dogs, which contributed greatly to the sense of pride amongst Jews in the Yishuv for being able to contribute to the fight against the Nazis. Despite Rudolphina's great success training mine-detecting dogs for the British during World War II, her authority as the supreme expert on military dogs in Palestine was challenged not long after the war ended. In November 1947, the Haganah began to lay the groundwork for an official canine unit in anticipation of its eventual integration into the established army of the new state. At that time, it seemed inevitable that Rudolphina would be put in charge of the unit. In the 1947 annual report for her institute, she wrote:

In November we addressed the Haganah Chief of Staff Yaakov Dori and requested to expand the Institute's reach of activities to comply with future demands. Yaakov Dori decided that Dr. Menzel would be the sole leader and professional address for all canine issues. Moshe Dayan was sent to us and together we started planning the canine activities and organizational structure for the soon-to-be-formed Army.

Consequently, Rudolphina assumed a commanding tone when she wrote an article for the dog trainers and handlers of Palestine as preparations for war accelerated:

Not every generation is as blessed as ours, for we are lucky to witness the dreams of our youth come true; a hope of two thousand years is coming true. We, the Jewish dog handlers, will see how our own dogs will take their place in the building of our homeland, as they have so far taken their place as our loyal companions. But alas, we do not have time to celebrate, as this is the hour of preparation. Each of us at our post.

Unbeknownst to her, this would be the last time Rudolphina addressed

her handlers and trainers as leader and mentor. In February 1948, Yaakov Dori, Chief of Staff for the Haganah, sent her a letter informing her of the Haganah's revised plans for a canine military unit:

We have decided to found a "Central Military Dog Training Camp" for all of our military unit's needs. We ask that you be the professional supervisor. We assume these supervising activities will keep you busy for half a day's work, every day. We hope that with the foundation of the Hebrew State, the Institution will be fully built and your dream and hard work will bear its fruit. As for this "Central Training Camp," we could not achieve it if not for your hard work and devotion.

This letter was bittersweet; it informed Rudolphina that she would no longer be in charge of the military canine unit as the Yishuv transitioned to statehood. Instead, she would only oversee the educational-professional aspects of the canine issues as a part-time job. While acknowledging her significant contributions to establishing the entire foundation of dog-training in the country, Dori basically sidelined her. In her place, one of Rudolphina's first students from

her 1937 dog-training course, Abraham Zirlin, was assigned to be the commander of the new canine unit. Zirlin's military expertise as a soldier, as well as his experience as a dog handler for the Haganah, made him the perfect candidate for the job. Zirlin was put in charge of the canine unit's management and administration, all things Rudolphina used to supervise, and he was also put in charge of Rudolphina herself. It seemed that this move was well-planned by the new Israel Defense Force (IDF) command, as illustrated by the letters of complaint Rudolphina wrote to Moshe Dayan. Rudolphina had been replaced.

Rudolphina's demotion to part-time educational supervisor in 1948 understandably resulted in a rift between her and the IDF. She retained an honorary title that enabled her to maintain occasional work with military canines and was appointed the Government Advisor for dog breeding and training, in which position she served as a member of a formal, government inter-ministerial committee that addressed the use of guard dogs for security needs. The committee was led by her old Haganah associate Yaakov Pat. This role was primarily an honorary one, given by the new Israeli establishment to thank her for her years

of contribution. Thus, when the Israel Defense Force was officially founded in June 1948, Dr. Menzel's military career came to an end.

In June 1949, the IDF headquarters decided to transfer the canine unit—which was then under the command of the IDF's animal services—to the military police, as was common in the armed forces of other nations. The IDF's canine unit was active until 1954, when it was closed for twenty years; it was refounded in 1974 as a special operations combat unit under the command of the infantry corps' headquarters. The IDF's current elite canine unit "Oketz," considered to be amongst the world's best, continues to use dog-training methods pioneered by Rudolphina. The link she created between Zionism and dog training was essential not only to the Allied war effort during World War II but also to the establishment of the state. ■

Excerpted from "Canine Pioneer: The Extraordinary Life of Rudolphina Menzel," edited by Susan Martha Kahn, copyright 2022. Reprinted with permission of Brandeis University Press.

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FOOD

Israeli Restaurants Reach for the Star

Chefs and diners await the debut of the country's Michelin guide

BY FLORA TSAPOVSKY

Outshone by politics and economics, food rarely makes headlines in Israel. But in November 2022, the country was abuzz with a culinary scoop: The Michelin guide, which ranks the world's best restaurants with stars

and mentions, is on its way to Israel. For the small nation, the news was big—and met with both excitement and anxiety.

The Michelin guide has been around since 1920 and, over the years, has morphed from a road-trip guide in booklet form, issued by the French tire company Michelin, into a popular resource that

can propel fine dining chefs into financial success and stardom. Israel, to date, has been absent from the guide altogether. While its influence on the global culinary scene is often a topic of debate, the guide is still considered, by the restaurant industry and those who follow it, an important and lucrative institution—important enough for governments and cities around the globe to invite Michelin to rank their restaurants, for a hefty price tag.

In the past, the guide would tackle different countries and cities on its own initiative; this is still the case in popular dining destinations like France and Italy, and large cities in the U.S. Yet in recent years, it has become a practice for tourism boards of countries not as prominent on the culinary map to commission the guide with the intention to draw attention and

traveler dollars to local gastronomy—such governments in the past have reportedly included South Korea, Thailand, and Singapore. In Israel, former Minister of Tourism Yoel Razvozov decided to follow their path.

“Once I entered this important ministry, it became clear to me that we ought to realize Israel’s potential when it comes to food and wine tourism,” Razvozov said. “These are very developed fields in Israel, and it was important to me that it will be known that there are Michelin-starred restaurants in the country, that there would be a guide for us at the very least.”

Razvozov, an immigrant from Russia, and a relatively young and unknown politician, assumed the governmental post in 2021 when, after yet another election cycle, his Yesh Atid party came to power. Soon after assuming the role, his office had reached out to the French representatives of the guide and initiated a negotiation process. According to the televised segment that broke the news, the two options were a five-year contract for 2 million euros (\$2.2 million), or a three-year contract at the cost of 1.5 million euros (\$1.6 million), with the latter being chosen in the end. “We’re in the last leg of the process,” said Razvozov. “It can be a matter of weeks.” Once the contract comes through, the guide should start seeking out restaurants to feature. The contract focuses on issuing a Michelin guide for Israel, with mentions of the best local restaurants. There’s no obligation to hand out stars, but if the guide’s representatives find restaurants that answer the appropriate criteria, stars will be given.

A Restaurant in Tel Aviv, one of the restaurants speculated to receive a Michelin star Instagram

In a late December follow-up to the initial news on Israel’s TV Channel 12, the encouraging timeline was supported by showcasing an official document from Michelin, stating the preliminary agreement terms. The government had changed yet again in recent months, but Razvozov says that new Minister of Tourism Haim Katz has been made aware of the project’s importance and will only have to give it the blessing of a final signature.

A few Israeli chefs have already tasted Michelin recognition, but only outside of Israel: Israeli-led restaurants with a star

include Prism in Berlin and the Parisian Shabour by chef Assaf Granit. A countrywide acceptance into the Michelin guide—at whatever price—may mean a lot to Israel, both financially and politically. “I have no doubt that this would increase culinary tourism to Israel and bring money to the Israeli economy,” said Razvozov.

Indeed, in 2017, the world-renowned chef Joel Robuchon stated that one Michelin star equals about 20% more business, two stars lead to a 40% increase, and three stars to a 100% increase. In various studies on the effect of Michelin on gastronomy tourism, it has been found that inclusion in the guide can result in as much as a 25% increase in tourism; Thailand had evaluated its Michelin debut at a 10% increase.

But, beyond the monetary significance, the Michelin guide equals recognition like no other. Politically, there’s never been a better time. “I can assume that the recent Negev Summit, as well as the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, had contributed to the political stature of Israel and have expanded the financial options,” said Razvozov. In recent years, Michelin has been favoring the region in general, entering Dubai and Turkey in 2022. It is also, for those who aren’t into regional politics, simply a stamp of global prestige.

“A Michelin star is still very much a status symbol and the few restaurants in Israel that do fine dining really want it, as a verification to what they aim to showcase,” said Amit Aaronsohn, a prominent Israeli food journalist and podcaster. “The common perception is that Michelin automatically puts you on the radar of foodies in the world, and while we like to think of ourselves as a culinary capital, we’re still far from being one on a world-class level.” According to Aaronsohn, the entrance of Michelin into the country will cement its status in a new, prominent way: “Let’s say it will be much easier for Netflix to do an episode of *Chef’s Table* in Israel once that happens.”

Aaronsohn also notes that while, in the past, it has been claimed that a lack of consistency and service quality had separated Israel from its Michelin stardom, the Bib Gourmand—the guide’s more relaxed system of highlighting and recommending more casual eateries—has been awarded, in other countries, to hawker

stalls and street food vendors that aren’t necessarily buttoned-up. “In that sense, our street food definitely delivers on the experience,” he said. “It will be interesting to see what happens with the Michelin guide here in that category.”

Will Israeli diners care? “There’s a big difference between the approach of Israelis who go abroad to dine at upscale restaurants and Israelis who simply want to go out in their own backyard,” Aaronsohn said. “One of the characteristics of a Michelin-starred restaurant is ceremonial and meticulous service—it’s a whole new set of rules the Israeli diner isn’t cut out for on his home turf.”

However, while the awareness of Michelin’s importance in Israel is still in its infancy, among those few establishments Aaronsohn had described—the Israeli restaurants that will serve you an artful tasting menu and fold your napkin after you leave for the restroom—the excitement is peaking. Soon after the news broke, speculations about potential star recipients began in the local media, name-checking such beloved institutions as A Restaurant and the kosher Animar. One restaurant that has been in the center of the Michelin guessing game is the new Hiba, led by chef Yossi Shitrit. Hiba opened in early 2022, with a reported investment of 7 million shekels (close to \$2 million), serving a locally inspired, 14-course tasting menu to 35 diners at a time. It is perpetually booked, even with two sittings a night. Upon opening, Shitrit had announced in a TV segment that he’s aiming for Israel’s first Michelin star. “Everyone had raised their eyebrows back then,” he said. “But now it might become a reality.”

According to Shitrit, what “makes” a Michelin-worthy restaurant is the focus on high-quality ingredients, and detailed service—“less noise on the floor.” Bringing the guide to Israel, Shitrit says, will not only attract tourism interest, but will improve the standard of Israeli dining from within. “This will create a huge boost in striving for excellence,” he said. “If restaurateurs see that being consistently great might lead to a Michelin star and a full restaurant, they’ll aim for the star.” ■

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Dried Fruit Compote

With almonds, rosewater, and star anise

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup dried figs**
- 1 cup dried apricots, halved**
- ½ cup golden raisins**
- 4 cups boiling water**
- 2 tablespoons sugar or honey, or to taste**
- 2 tablespoons rosewater**
- 1 or 2 whole star anise**
- ⅓ cup blanched almonds, soaked**

PREPARATION

Place the dried figs, apricots and golden raisins in a bowl and cover with 4 cups boiling water. Cover the bowl with a plate, then set aside for 1 or 2 hours to plump up. Transfer to a saucepan and add the sugar, rosewater, and star anise. Bring to the boil, then simmer, covered, for 20 to 25 minutes or until the fruit is tender and the liquid is syrupy, adding a little more water if necessary. Remove from the heat and allow to cool. Add the almonds, then chill thoroughly before serving.

Yield: Serves 8 to 10

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