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NEWS

Med Men

How Big Pharma's investment in the advertising model taught us to view health as another consumer choice

BY ANN BAUER

In 2009, I took a job as a copywriter with an ad agency in Minneapolis. After 10 years of academia and publishing in obscure literary magazines, I began writing copy for health care and medical device accounts. The work was boring but the salary was grand, and so I threw myself into learning about stents and dilatation balloons.

About a year into the job a large meeting was called. Suddenly my colleagues—those of the running shoe and vodka accounts—wanted in. Our flagship health care client was looking for a multimedia retail campaign for their pacemaker.

A pacemaker is a simple device that can be lifesaving, essentially a low-voltage clock used to speed up and regulate a slow or sloppy heart rate. It was developed in the late 1950s and patented in 1962. Since then, the technology has not changed much. The device got smaller and the surgery to insert it more streamlined, but as a mechanical object, the design was pretty perfect.

The problem for an ad agency is that there was nothing new to sell. So our strategy team came up with a new approach: *chronotropic incompetence*.

In younger people, chronotropic incompetence was defined as the inability to increase the heart rate adequately

during exercise to match cardiac output. But that clinical condition, while a problem for younger people, was also understood as the normal baseline as people aged into their 70s and their heart rate became gradually less responsive to exertion.

But why should the elderly live with slower heart rates and ragged breathing? This was our clients' epiphany—what we called a “shared belief.” There was nothing specific in the literature that said chronotropic incompetence couldn't include the old. Pacemakers for every senior! We would establish this as the standard of care.

By 2010, people 65 and over made up 13.1% of the American population. But the surge in that demographic was clear and imminent. Just 10 years later, they were nearly 17% of the population and by 2030, it's estimated they'll be more than 20%. This campaign was worth billions to our client over 20 years.

What I was witnessing more than a decade ago was the new face of health care in America: an alliance between big pharmaceutical companies and marketing firms that replaced the old injunction to “do no harm” with a profit-driven mandate to leave no facet of life unmedicalized. American pharmaceuticals were spending \$3.6 billion on direct-to-consumer ads in 2012; as of 2021 that number was at \$6.8 billion.

In 2021, the total spend for health care advertising in the U.S. was \$32.76 billion, with projections that it will rise another 5.2% even over pandemic highs by 2029.

These multi-million-dollar campaigns have been a huge success. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, I suddenly knew multiple people who were getting elective gastric bypass and dozens undergoing plastic surgery. Four older ladies I knew swore if they hadn't had their eyelids lifted and tightened around age 60, they wouldn't have been able to see. The husbands and children of several colleagues initiated surgical gender reassignment; others invested in bionic prosthetics to fix faulty joints and enhance athletic performance. Nearly everyone in my urban circle had multiple prescriptions for mood enhancing or stabilizing drugs. The vast majority took an SSRI (like Zoloft). Roughly half carried a bottle of something for anxiety—usually Valium or Klonopin—in their purse. A few years ago there was a wave of ADHD diagnoses among my over-40 female friends, who immediately started taking daily Adderall.

This is the new normal: fully medicalized living in America. But back in 2009, it wasn't yet so. There were huge swathes of untapped audience for voluntary health care. After learning of the potential profits that pacemaker sales promised in a rapidly aging U.S. population, my agency set up a war room and plotted out a multimedia direct-to-consumer (DTC) campaign. Artful black-and-white photos of 70-year-olds finishing half-marathons, doing yoga on the beach, and chasing after their grandchildren. For the superelderly, our campaign showed them walking to get their own mail, climbing stairs, or strolling hand-in-hand.

You're the evidence, read our headline. (I did not write it.) The message was that we didn't need fancy scientific studies to prove that pacemakers could help mitigate the symptoms of aging. Older people enjoying their lives and breathing deeply were enough to make the case.

If the activities you love are harder to do, ask your doctor about chronotropic incompetence, advised our copy.

It was easy to believe we were doing something noble: giving elderly people a better quality of life. What we were actually doing was creating a disease state and packaging it for the general public. But weeks before we released the campaign into the world, Katy Butler (whom I knew briefly in my academic life) wrote a gonzo essay for *The New York Times* called "What Broke My Father's Heart."

After a disabling stroke at age 79, Butler's father suffered an inguinal hernia that surgeons refused to repair unless he was fitted with a pacemaker. What followed was five years of increasing dementia, memory loss, strokes, falls, blindness and incontinence, through which his heart kept beating. When his wife of 60 years asked doctors to deactivate the pacemaker and let her husband die peacefully, they refused.

Butler's father suffered for five days with end-stage pneumonia, gasping for air through wet lungs, until lack of oxygen finally overcame the pacemaker's pull. A year later, Butler's mother rejected a recommended bypass surgery, had two heart attacks in quick succession, and joined her husband in death.

The article—which led to Butler's *New York Times* bestselling book, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*—was circulated somberly by one of our clients at the medical device company, who then put the consumer campaign on hold. We never did resume. But somehow the message we had intended for the public got out to doctors, who began recommending pacemakers more widely. My own parents both received pacemakers recently, in their 80s, despite a long list of health problems that keep them bound to the couch. When I asked why, neither could say.

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ARTS & LETTERS

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My brush with DTC medical marketing happened at a time when advertising itself was changing course.

After years of wooing consumers with commercials and billboards, marketers realized it was easier—and more profitable—to *keep* customers than to court them. Mobile technology made direct communication with buyers possible. The agency I worked for acquired a massive loyalty/one-to-one enterprise in mid-2010 and began turning campaigns that way.

Loyalty marketing is behind the explosion in subscription services and rewards programs—for car rentals and hotels, groceries and gas, makeup purchases, coffee orders. If a customer felt like they were “part of” the brand, and like they were getting a special deal in exchange for their membership, they would keep coming back.

Direct-to-consumer marketing of medical devices never really caught on among the B2C (business to consumer) audience. But it’s used broadly by physicians and hospital administrators (B2B). Device manufacturers stage or rent booths at conferences, where they engage [pay] key opinion leaders (KOLs)—star doctors in their fields—to speak and recommend their products; the manufacturers also treat potential buyers to lavish dinners, swag bags, and bulk pricing that make procedures more profitable over time.

But pharmaceutical companies embraced DTC subscription marketing, blanketing nearly every inch of television ad space, but especially those programs watched by older Americans—news and talk shows, primetime dramas, *Jeopardy!*, and reruns of *Blue Bloods*. Most of these ads use the strategy my team was given—popularizing a worrisome new disease state with a memorable name—to convince people they’re in need of help.

One of the earliest examples is Fosamax, a drug developed by Merck to treat osteoporosis and released in 1995. When sales of Fosamax disappointed the company, they hired a consultant who came up with an outrageous—and wildly successful—marketing plan. First, he set up a nonprofit called the Bone Measurement Institute. The

“It was easy to believe we were doing something noble: giving elderly people a better quality of life. What we were actually doing was creating a disease state and packaging it for the general public.”

nonprofit funded low-cost bone density scanners that tested only a wrist or a heel, and made sure they were placed in doctor’s offices nationwide.

Most important, their scanner’s chart spit out three categories for bone density: Good bone health was green, osteoporosis was red. But in the middle was a new category that showed mostly normal bone thinning, due to age or slightness of frame. They called it osteopenia, a term coined by doctors a few years earlier. Merck used this term, however, to scare women into taking medications, thereby medicalizing and monetizing the natural effects of aging. If people had once believed that losing bone density was just part of getting older, the ad-men of the pharmaceutical industry were here to sell a new dream—that every ailment, including mortality itself, could be treated with the right product.

At the same time, Merck lobbied Medicare and private insurance companies to cover bone scans and formulated a low-dose version of Fosamax for osteopenia. A 1997 FDA “clarification” on how broadcasters could get around the required drug risk statement (for instance, by providing an 800 number for viewers to call for information) opened the floodgates. In the following years,

marquee actresses like Sally Field and Blythe Danner promoted osteopenia drugs on TV. Millions of women were converted overnight to a condition they’d never heard of—that their doctor might have learned about at a conference the year before. Fosamax went from just over \$500 million in sales that year to \$3.2 billion in 2005, becoming Merck’s second-best-selling drug.

Problems emerged in the mid-2000s, when it became clear Fosamax actually caused an *increased* risk of bone fracture in some women, especially of the legs and jawbones. Patients who were taking the drug were warned not to have dental surgery due to the risk of infection and possible loss of their jaw. By 2006, the American Association of Endodontists drew a definitive link between Fosamax and “jaw bone death,” issuing a position statement that warned against root canal in women taking the drug.

Even for the women who didn’t suffer side effects, the drug just wasn’t terribly effective. A systematic review of 33 studies published by Therapeutics Initiative in 2012 found “no statistically significant reduction in hip or wrist fracture” for women who fell into the mild bone loss or “osteopenia” category. It was a slickly produced mirage.

“Sickness used to happen to you,” says Kim Witczak, founder of the nonprofit Woody Matters, which advocates for pharmaceutical drug safety. “Now we live in a world where it’s being sold to us.”

We’re told repeatedly how expensive it is to bring new drugs to market, and this fact is used to justify the methods Pharma uses to push its products, from television advertising to free samples in doctor’s offices. They need to generate income in order to create the next blockbuster cure. But Witczak says this is a convenient myth.

FOOD

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“Pharma companies spend \$480 billion every year,” she says. “Of that, 5% goes to research and development; the other 95% is spent on marketing. There is a lot of self-interest working behind the scenes to come up with brand new disorders and dysfunctions, medicalizing everyday life, portraying mild problems as serious by widening diagnostic boundaries, creating extensive assessment tools, and corrupting medical research.”

Kim Witzcak knows this corruption, because she’s lived it.

In 2003, her husband, Woody, was prescribed Zoloft off-label for sleep issues related to an exciting but stressful new job. He was given a free, three-week starter pack of the drug by his general practitioner—a pack that doubled the dose of the drug automatically after one week.

Kim returned from an overseas business trip to find her usually cheery husband ranting, sweating, and telling her it felt like his head was “floating outside [his] body.” She calmed him down and they called the doctor who insisted the Zoloft needed a few more weeks to kick in. Woody should stay on the doubled dose of the drug.

Things seemed to level out. Kim and Woody were planning a 10th anniversary trip, to Thailand. She felt confident enough to go out of town on business again. But when a day went by and she couldn’t get hold of Woody—then his business partner called to say he hadn’t showed up for a meeting—she got nervous. She called her dad and asked him to check the house.

Kim Witzcak’s father found her husband, Woody, age 37, hanging dead from the rafters in their garage. At first, stunned, she had no idea why her happy, successful husband had taken his own life, abruptly, midcalendar, without even leaving a note. Then her brother-in-law

“Sickness used to happen to you. Now we live in a world where it’s being sold to us.”

pointed out that investigators on the scene seized the bottle of Zoloft. So she started asking questions.

She would spend the years after burying her husband pursuing a lawsuit against Pfizer, the maker of Zoloft; speaking to the Food and Drug Administration about DTC advertising of pharmaceuticals; and pushing for a “black-box” warning (BBW)—the most severe warning the FDA issues, that a medication has potentially life-threatening side effects—on antidepressants.

Witzcak settled her wrongful death suit against Pfizer in 2006, for an undisclosed amount—and with no NDA, so she could keep telling her story. Pfizer documents unearthed by her lawyers during the court case showed Woody precisely fit the suicidality profile from clinical trials: a man in his 30s whose dose was abruptly doubled. But doctors who were gifted boxes full of starter packs by sales reps were never warned.

Multiple factors brought us to where we are with consumer health in America. There’s the aging of baby boomers—that generation determined to stay youthful through science, remain in power forever, and never die. But the love of medical intervention seemed to stretch down through the generations. A

recent study shows that most millennials take at least one prescription medication each day.

There was the shift in sales strategy, leveraging technology to reach customers directly, preying on their pain points and worries, using their demographic information and internet search histories to target exactly what pill, product or procedure they are most likely to believe they need. Meanwhile pharmaceutical companies took a near universal turn toward advertising new disease states—osteopenia, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, social anxiety disorder, binge eating disorder, low T—in order to expand the market for their drugs.

Yet the cleverest, most efficient method to sell new drugs requires no fancy advertising or media buys. It’s the simple chart, graph or questionnaire at your family doctor’s office.

Merck highlighted the osteopenia results of patients’ bone density scans in a bright warning yellow. The Sackler family, makers of Oxycontin, created the 1-10 pain scale with simple sad, mad, and happy faces to generate conversations between patients and their doctors about the need for painkillers. And that questionnaire you fill out at every doctor visit—asking if you’ve felt worthless in the past two weeks, had trouble concentrating, if you’ve eaten too much or too little—was written by three doctors funded by a grant from Pfizer, a brand that’s now as embedded in the zeitgeist as Coca-Cola, even featured in Facebook posts and tattoos.

“That questionnaire is nothing more than a sales funnel,” says Witzcak. “It gets people to focus on these problems—even if it’s not what they came in for—and gives doctors the perfect opening to have a conversation, and once they come up with the disorder to match the symptoms, they’re in the funnel. They’re Pharma’s customer. Often, for life.”

When she started Woody Matters, Witzcak’s original fight was with Pfizer, maker of Zoloft. But in 2020 with the start of the pandemic, her mission broadened. Pfizer is also the manufacturer of COVID vaccines and the antiviral therapy Paxlovid—both endorsed and purchased by the U.S. government in large quantities. For years, Witzcak

SPORTS

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had questioned Pfizer's methods and their transparency about clinical trials, but when she asked her standard questions about the Pfizer vaccines, her friends and admirers—people who had attended her fundraisers and cheered her investigative work—insisted she'd gone too far.

"I was told that while they respected my other drug safety advocacy, I was completely wrong in the way I was looking at the vaccines," she says. The resistance came mostly from former business colleagues, the liberal urban professionals who had kept her nonprofit afloat.

As she voiced skepticism about the COVID-19 vaccines, support for Woody Matters ground to a halt.

There's a case to be made that more and better access to health care options—including drugs—improves the lot of most people. Take telehealth, which became the standard of care during the pandemic. For the first time, people didn't need to take hours off work and sit in a crowded, germey waiting room to be seen for a skin lesion or a prescription refill. This has led to hybrid health/lifestyle sites like forhims.com (and forhers.com), where online patients can get help with depression, sexual dysfunction and hair loss—all with a single video conference.

In 2022, tech entrepreneur Mark Cuban launched Cost Plus Drug Co.—a for-profit online pharmacy that sells generic versions of commonly prescribed drugs for the cost of manufacturing them plus a 15% markup. Cuban is undercutting the prices charged by Pharma companies and providing people with a sustainable, affordable way to treat literally hundreds of conditions from allergies and acid reflux to diabetes, thyroid disease, multiple sclerosis, heart failure and cancer.

In a perfect world, low-impact options like virtual mental health counseling, preventive medicine, affordable prescription drugs, and integrated health systems would sound like improvements in terms of customer choice.

That equation is already complicated enough for adults whose choices are shaped by Pharma's massive ad campaigns and influence on medical professionals, but today it may be children who represent Pharma's ripest opportunity

"Pharma companies spend \$480 billion every year. Of that, 5% goes to research and development; the other 95% is spent on marketing."

for profit. Caught between pediatricians, schools, drug companies, governments and parents, kids are—from a sales perspective—the ideal consumers because they aren't required to give their consent to be administered drugs.

In addition to the schedule of 20-25 individual vaccines by 15 months (mandated in varying formulas by states and school districts), the market for drugs that control kids' behavior is exploding. From ADHD to anxiety to bed-wetting, there's a pill to treat them—endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), whose principal donors include Abbott, Merck, GlaxoSmithKline, Novavax, and several formula makers. Criteria for childhood disorders keep broadening. For example, in 2003, just 5.4% of school children were diagnosed with clinical anxiety. The figure grew to 8% in 2007 and 8.4% by 2011–12. In 2016-19, 9.4% of children were diagnosed with anxiety serious enough to require treatment.

In January 2023, the AAP issued guidelines recommending that doctors begin treating children with obesity using newly approved pharmaceuticals and bariatric surgery (gastric bypass), as early as age 12. (Handily, childhood obesity surged during school closures and lockdowns imposed by elected officials in response to COVID-19.) And

since 2021, the AAP in partnership with state and federal government policy, has supported highly medicalized "gender-affirming care" for the fast-growing number of trans youth, beginning with puberty blockers. This leads to the use of feminizing or masculinizing hormone therapy and in some cases genital surgeries, which require drug therapy for life.

Combine that with the ever-growing list of vaccines that are required for both children and adults—to attend school or work, and at one point in 2022 even enter a restaurant—and it's clear that Pharma has become an unavoidable third rail of American life.

Like that infamous Batman scene where the walls are closing in as the ceiling descends, relentless health care marketing combined with new government mandates and agency guidelines threaten to squash the consumer—resulting in a system that is less about the individual and more about an inescapable system of medical processes and rules.

But it should come as no surprise. We saw a hint of this new world back in 2010, when Katy Butler wrote her family's story. Her father was required to get a pacemaker implanted, ostensibly to help him survive surgery. But when he was dying in fear and misery, unable to take a breath but stuck in life as the device sent electrical pulses to his heart, the medical powers from on high refused to turn it off. ■

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COMMUNITY

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THE REST

→ Roughly **40% of American eighth graders are testing “below basic” levels in U.S. history, a stark decline in academic performance that began about a decade ago but accelerated significantly during the pandemic.**

In 2014, just 29% of students who participated in the Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress fell to the “below basic” level.

Falling to the lowest level since the testing began in 1994, the results of the most recent exam found students struggling with both basic and complex questions. For example, only 6% of eighth-grade students could offer an explanation in their own words for how Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech reflected core ideas from the Constitution.

Similar declines in academic performance have appeared in scores on math and reading, though some suspect that the particularly acute decline in history has occurred partly because social studies testing is not mandated and therefore less a focus for teachers.

→ **Concerned that the upcoming sunset of Title 42 will lead to a massive surge of perhaps twice the usual volume of migrants attempting to cross the U.S. southern border, the Biden administration will deploy 1,500 troops for at least three months to support Border Patrol agents,** according to U.S. officials speaking on background to the media on Tuesday. While troops have been sent to the border to aid in migrant processing as far back as the Bush administration, the current deployment of active-duty rather than National Guard soldiers is a notable wrinkle as President Joe Biden and his nascent re-election campaign contend with the tricky optics of a heavy military presence and a new set of restrictive immigration policies that will make it difficult for Biden to separate his approach from that of his predecessor and the current GOP front-runner, Donald Trump.

→ A U.S. Department of Labor investigation has found **two 10-year-old children working at a Louisville, Kentucky, McDonald’s on shifts as late as 2 a.m.,** officials said on Tuesday. Three franchisees with at least 60 other McDonald’s locations scattered across the Midwest were also found to have “employed 305 children to work more than the legally permitted hours and perform tasks prohibited by law for young workers,” the Labor Department said in a statement. The report comes amid a growing number of violations of federal child-labor rules, with **the department finding 688 minors who were illegally working in hazardous conditions, the highest annual count since 2011.**

→ Speaking of tough jobs for American children, Texas state Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins (D) proposed a recent amendment to an existing bill that would require **schools to lower the current grade level to include third-grade students in receiving training on how to operate “bleeding control stations” during school mass shootings and other events involving “traumatic injury involving blood loss.”** Because “there’s no appetite for doing gun reform,” Gervin-Hawkins told a local reporter, “then we’ve got to do something, and if we could save one life, then we’ve done at least that.” Among other skills, the 8- and 9-year-old students would learn how to use “tourniquets approved for use in battlefield trauma care by the armed forces of the United States.”

THE BIG STORY

Some dozen rabbis within the Skver Hasidic movement have declared a prohibition against the use of AI-powered chatbots and other forms of artificial intelligence, the latest instance of ultra-Orthodox leaders forbidding the use of nascent digital technology among their followers. In an open letter written in Hebrew and published last Thursday, the rabbis declare that AI is “open to all abominations, heresy, and infidelity without limits,” adding that “it is possible that at this point, not everyone knows the magnitude and scope of the danger, but it has become clear to us in our souls that this thing will be a trap for all of us, young and old.”

Based in New Square, New York, the Skver community has taken a more restrictive approach toward the internet compared to some other Orthodox groups, notably the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, which has largely embraced new technologies as a vehicle for reaching followers. Many Hasidic groups fall somewhere in the middle, urging followers to utilize so-called kosher internet filters that ban gambling, pornography, and other content deemed to be harmful. While the Skver statement appears out of step with the culture of technological progress, it echoes concerns voiced by high-level figures in the tech world, including Elon Musk, who have called for a moratorium on AI development until safeguards mitigating its dangers can be enacted.

—Sean Cooper

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Commie Chic Invades American Grade Schools

Angela Davis was a dedicated fangirl of Soviet dictator Leonid Brezhnev and cult leader Jim Jones. So why is she presented to children as a hero?

BY DAVID MIKICS

Every day, my son, who is in seventh grade, sees a quotation from Angela Davis painted on his school's wall: "Radical simply means grasping things at the root." (The line actually comes from Karl Marx.) Four years ago, during Black History Month, a poster of Davis beamed down from the wall of his public elementary school in Brooklyn.

I eagerly praise my son's charter school to other parents. It's full of dedicated teachers who urge their students to debate politics and history with an open mind. So I wrote to the administration, proposing that they should balance the school's homage to Davis with a quotation from Andrei Sakharov or Natan Sharansky, who fought to free the millions of Soviet bloc citizens that Davis wanted to keep locked up. After all, I reasoned, some of the school's families are themselves refugees from communist tyrannies. My suggestion was met with silence.

Davis, who is now euphemistically celebrated as an "activist," was in fact a loyal apparatchik who served working-class betrayers, some of whom were murderous bureaucrats, and others outright maniacs who defy any normative political description. Among the objects of her adoration were dullards like the East German leader Erich Honecker and the stupefied (and stupefying) Soviet Communist Party Chairman Leonid Brezhnev, as well as the Reverend Jim

Jones. Before the grotesque mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, Davis broadcast a worshipful speech about Jones to the imprisoned Black women who were murdered by his cult.

There's hardly a more famous American communist than Davis, who twice ran for vice president on the CP ticket and stayed true to the party until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For decades, she tirelessly defended the brutalities of the elderly white men who ran the Eastern bloc. Now entering old age herself, Davis has escaped her rightful place doing penance at a memorial to victims of Stalinist tyranny to become a beacon for American millennials who make Soviet-style Black History Month posters. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar has named Davis her "idol." Omar, like rest of her Squad, is cut from Davis' pattern: Spurning the legions of African American women who stood up for freedom, she instead celebrates a dedicated lifelong bootlicker of communist-bloc tyrants. What redeems Davis, in the eyes of Omar and her fellow progressives, is apparently the fact that she was put on trial for supplying guns to the Black Panthers who murdered hostages during a 1970 shootout.

My son's school is not the only one with an enthusiasm for Davis. In 2021, *City Journal* reported on an elementary school in Philadelphia that led fifth graders in a simulated Black Power rally in which they shouted "Free Angela!" a reference to Davis' incarceration on murder and conspiracy charges, and adorned the walls of the school with murals of Davis

and Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. Last year, a high school in Rockland County, New York, invited Davis to speak on campus (the speech was canceled due to parental outrage). And the website of the National Women's History Museum offers a lesson plan—Common Core compliant!—on Davis' thought, which promises to help students "better make sense of the struggles of women and historically marginalized communities."

Praise for communists like Davis is a sign of the times. After all, the argument goes, they fought for the oppressed and against the evils of capitalism. A colleague who teaches Russian history tells me that in each class a handful of his students announce that they are communists. The students come equipped with handy rationalizations to explain away monstrous Soviet crimes. They argue, for instance, that Stalin was needed to defeat Hitler; if there had been no Stalin, many more Jews would have died in the Holocaust, so the numbers of Stalin's dead are outweighed by the people Hitler would have killed.

It's not just the left that makes excuses for the Soviet regime's crimes. President Trump claimed that Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979 "because terrorists were going into Russia. They were right to be there." Vladimir Putin, an ex-KGB man, models himself after the Soviet rulers in his paranoid wish to silence dissent, his reliance on political assassination, and his use of military force to establish regional dominance, so it's no surprise that he sees the communist era as a pinnacle of Russian glory. The official Chinese line on Mao is that he was a great leader who made some errors. No Chinese citizen will dare to discuss Mao's more striking errors, like the 20 million-plus killed by famine during the Great Leap Forward.

The state of Virginia also officially discourages teaching about the criminal behavior of communist regimes. In February the Virginia Senate's Democrats killed a Republican-sponsored bill that would have required public schools to teach students about the victims of communism. Public school teachers in Virginia are already required to cover slavery and the Holocaust. So why not communism? Because, a representative of the Virginia teachers union

explained, “There is a strong association between communism and Asians,” and so studying communism could lead to anti-Asian hate.

Idiots will attack anyone for any reason—a fact to live with. But the Virginia teachers union explanation is plainly bunk. It seems exceedingly unlikely that high school students, after learning about the many millions of Chinese peasants sacrificed at Mao’s whim, would pin the blame for the dictator’s atrocities on the Chinese American kid sitting next to them in class—perhaps a descendent of one of Mao’s victims.

The reality of course is that the Virginia teachers union is loath to desecrate the memories of their own communist poster boy and poster girl heroes. The real reason for failing to include communism in a history curriculum, one suspects, is that it reflects so poorly on the American left, which has so often made common cause with tyrants so long as they were anti-American, while blaming the right for all forms of “oppression.” If “right-wingers” are all racists and fascists, then it follows that communists were the good guys—even when they were committing mass murder.

We need an antidote to such binary madness, to the blatant manufacturing of alibis for some of the 20th century’s biggest psychotics and political killers and presenting this gross propaganda to children as historical fact. A first step in properly educating our children would be to help students grasp what communism did to the psyches of both its victims and beneficiaries, and how it achieved its murderous ends. Understanding communism as a belief system lets us see why it appeals so much to the progressive left—and what today’s authoritarian left has in common with its murderous ancestors.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn noted that guilt was contagious under Soviet communism:

Arrests rolled through the streets and apartment houses like an epidemic. Just as people transmit an epidemic infection from one to another without knowing it, by such innocent means as a handshake, a breath, handing someone something, so they passed on the

infection of inevitable arrest by a handshake, by a breath, by a chance meeting on the street. For if you are destined to confess tomorrow that you organized an underground group to poison the city’s water supply, and if today I shake hands with you on the street, that means I, too, am doomed.

Shaking a hand, making a joke, owning a book, knowing the wrong person, could all get ordinary Soviet citizens 10 years of impossibly hard labor in the savage wastes of Siberia during Stalin’s heyday. Your wife or husband would disown you. Your children would be sent to an orphanage. Karlo Stajner, a once-devoted Austrian communist who was caught up in Stalin’s terror after moving to Russia, reported the desperate cries of the wives of political prisoners, young mothers whose babies were ripped away from them after their first birthdays and offered up for adoption to the party faithful.

Even under Brezhnev, who presided over what the fellow-traveling journalist Alexander Cockburn called a “golden age” for the Soviet working class, you could—and probably would—be imprisoned or sent to a psychiatric hospital for merely asserting the right to own a forbidden book, let alone to emigrate.

Today’s progressives, like Soviet-era communists, share the belief that guilt is contagious. If you signed the *Harper’s* letter, you’re just as despicable as your co-signer J.K. Rowling, and the ardent young people in the newsroom will persecute you via Slack until you toe the line. If you’re lucky, you may be rehabilitated, perhaps after signing an elaborate pre-written confession. Otherwise, you will be forced to retire. Granted, you won’t be made to stand in the corner of a cell for days on end without sleep. But your family might be torn apart, and your job taken away, which is enough cause for today’s little apparatchiks to gleefully celebrate—at least until the spy agencies and big corporations decide to allow them more power.

Communists and contemporary progressives share a taste for exercising power by snitching, destroying the lives of dissenters and nonconformists, and by exorcising inconvenient facts by

destroying the language that is used to describe them. Hormones and mastectomies for kids become the “gender affirming care” officially endorsed by our government (even as these methods are being rejected by Europe, which actually cares about children’s lives). Putting biological males into women’s prisons is upholding “women’s rights,” even if it leads to rapes committed by these “women.” Discrimination against Asian students becomes the pursuit of “equity.” Judging people by group rather than individual identity is “justice.” “Black lives matter,” but not the lives of Black victims of violent crime—because progressive prosecutors no longer consider illegal gun possession a chargeable offense.

Here is Solzhenitsyn again:

There exists a collection of ready-made phrases, of labels, a selection of ready-made lies ... In the most scientific of texts it is required that someone’s false authority or false priority be upheld somewhere, and that someone be cursed for telling the truth ... And what can be said about those shrill meetings or trashy lunch-break gatherings where you are compelled to vote against your own opinion, to pretend to be glad over what distresses you?

One of his fellow prisoners, Solzhenitsyn recalls, two weeks before his arrest gave a lecture titled “Stalin’s Constitution—the Most Democratic in the World.”

America is currently devoted to stamping out actual thinking, the kind that forces you, if you’re a journalist or academic, to confront your own biases and wonder whether you’re right or wrong. Everyone must mouth the same catchphrases, or listen to them uncomplainingly, so that a false solidarity can make do when a true one is unavailable. We are propelled by cowardice, convenience, and low ambition, attributes more fitting to an authoritarian nation than a free and democratic one. Among our young, we are raising a generation of casual sadists and snitches whose overriding generational urge is absolute conformity.

The Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, whose memoir *To Build a Castle*

is one of the great books of the 20th century, takes aim at the age-old excuse given by timeservers under authoritarian rule. Their actions, they claim, were governed by fear. They were forced to be loyal servants of the regime.

Bukovsky writes:

I didn't believe the ones who said they had never known: how could you fail to notice the deaths of millions of people, the deaths of your neighbors and friends? Nor did I believe the ones who said they were afraid—their fear had brought them too many promotions... You don't get Stalin prizes and country houses if you're afraid.

Today's media, academy, government, and top corporations require one to go along with received notions about society and politics—ideas that originate with an American regime that unites large corporations, the academy, the leading parts of the Democratic Party, and America's spy services, into a soft version of the kind of communist totalitarianism that all true creative artists and people who cared about the fate of working people in the 20th century learned to despise. When he was a young man Bukovsky decided that he could never live with himself if he

were to find himself at middle age “making speeches from platforms and signing arrest warrants.” In the early '60s he and a handful of friends started gathering to read poems together in Moscow's Mayakovsky Square. These few dozen people would end up winning against a mighty empire with all its vast machinery of repression. The leaders, like Bukovsky, got sent to jail over and over. Sometimes they were in cells with posters of Angela Davis, an official Soviet hero.

Bukovsky's own unique stroke of genius, inspired by Alexander Yesenin-Volpin's idea that the protesters were merely standing up for their legal rights, was to flood the Soviet bureaucracy with complaints. Prisoners wrote between 10 and 30 letters each day, addressing them to officials and notable personalities, “complaining one rung higher each time about the reply from the person immediately below.” They wrote “to astronauts, writers, artists, actors, ballerinas; to all the secretaries of the Central Committee; all generals, admirals; productivity champions; shepherds, deer breeders, milkmaids; sportsmen...”

Each complaint had to be answered—such was the absurdity of Soviet officialdom—and each answer provided

the basis for another complaint. Every complaint required a dossier of its own. The ministerial offices couldn't keep up with the workload; officials broke deadlines and lost their bonuses. The system caved in, and Bukovsky and his friends were released.

A society cannot forever agree to abide by concepts that fail basic tests of reason, and which no one really believes in aside from cadres of snitches and sadistic loyalists. When people are willing to voice their doubts, instead of keeping them to themselves, the system caves in.

Communism is an inconvenient fact for progressives, because it shows what the authoritarian impulse to redesign society by force from above—as shared by yesterday's communists and today's communist-worshipping progressives—can lead to. As Bukovsky writes, “People attain absolute equality only in the graveyard, and if you want to turn your country into a gigantic graveyard, go ahead, join the socialists.”

Capitalism may often be ruthless, barbaric, and unfair. But our children should also be taught that it is preferable to a graveyard. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The New Herodians

Herod the Great's alignment with the Roman empire led to both the high-point of Jewish power and the destruction of the Jewish state

BY TONY BADRAN

In its increasingly tense encounter with the American empire, the modern State of Israel finds itself confronted with an ancient choice: whether to continue as an independent state or whether to become a fractured Levantine client of a great power, governed by a Herodian

faction. Rooted in the geography of the region and also in the historical experience of the Jewish people, the choice of how Israel positions itself now is likely to have extreme consequences for the future of the first Jewish state in over two millennia.

The choice of Israel's elites, as expressed through a month of street

demonstrations and an ongoing media campaign against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his proposed judicial reforms, is clear. Their strategy is to position themselves as a modern-day version of the Herodians, the famous allies of Rome whose preeminent king, Herod the Great, built the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem as well as the great fortress of Masada. Renowned during his lifetime and even 2,000 years after his death as a master builder, Herod not only ruled over the largest Jewish kingdom since the Iron Age, but managed to insinuate his relatives into the corridors of imperial power. Herod's grandson was educated in Rome in the circles of imperial princes who befriended him, and his great-granddaughter Berenice was the lover of the future emperor of Rome—a liaison that,

if consummated in marriage, might have fused Judaism and Rome at a much earlier juncture in history, and with what could have only been a very different effect, than Constantine's conversion to Christianity.

Yet for the Jews, the reign of Herod and his family was but a way station on the path to disaster, culminating in the destruction of Herod's Temple along with all vestiges of Jewish national independence for the next two millennia. It didn't take long following Herod's death for Judea to come under direct Roman rule as a province. Unrest would commence within a generation. By the time of his great-grandson, the destruction of the Jewish kingdom that Herod once ruled was so complete that the Jews became the world's reigning metaphor for a stateless people, and the rise of Zionism, 19 centuries later, appeared to many, Jews and Christians alike, as nothing less than a modern-day miracle.

The Herodian pitch for Roman backing against their internal foes was not only not unique to their faction, but also in no way a particularly Jewish fault. The habit of local factions seeking external intervention defines the fractured societies of the Levant—Lebanon and Syria, as well as the stateless Kurds and Palestinians—who are unlikely ever to be sovereign. Such internally splintered polities have been the Levant's structural characteristic going back for millennia, resulting from and contributing to its historical standing as “the crossroads of Empire”—i.e., a battleground for the armies of more stable and successful cultures.

Since its rebirth as a modern state, Israel has stood as an anomaly in the Levant: a cohesive and militarily powerful nation-state in a region where stability is hard to find. To ensure its independence, Israel became a nuclear power—attaining a destructive capability that only a few advanced states possess, and which would appear to serve as a potent hedge against conventional attack. According to some estimates, Israel now possesses either the fourth- or the fifth-most-powerful military in the world.

Yet far from utilizing Israel's military strength to protect its own interests,

which is the normal purpose of the imperial-client relationship, the ruling faction of the American empire has been working hard for the past decade toward an arrangement that recognizes and guarantees nuclear status for the hostile revisionist state in the east: Iran. Impeding Israel from taking action to prevent that outcome, which would establish Iran as a regional hegemon, has been the primary driver of the empire's posture toward the Jewish state for the past decade—a posture that has hardened once again over the past few months. U.S. backing for the street demonstrations in Israel can therefore be understood within the wider scope of U.S. regional policy, whose cornerstone is the pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran.

Yet inviting the U.S. to participate in Israel's internal politics has been a key part of the Israeli elite's strategy to win their own battles at home. The Herodian faction's leaders moved to mobilize support from American Jewish organizations as a prelude to requesting intervention by the empire against the country's elected leader and his government—a move that in the domestic politics of a more stable country would be strictly off-limits. Israel's new Herodians adopted the imperial lexicon to describe their fight—“shared values” and “safeguarding democracy against the rise of authoritarianism,” and so on—as a gesture of loyalty to the empire's ruling faction. The messaging to other Israelis was transparent: We are the faction favored by the empire.

Indeed, the American empire soon stepped in to publicly back the Herodians, broadcasting the imperial dictum that demanded the Israeli government secure “consensus” before proceeding with its proposed legislation to reform its judiciary. Visiting American imperial officials likewise began meeting with the Herodians on par with the government, underscoring the need for the elected government to reach “consensus” with the imperially favored faction, and to do so under an aegis approved by the empire.

Washington presented its active role in internal Israeli politics as a benevolent answer to the petitions of the Israeli



Indie Rock, Israeli Style

A new documentary traces the life and death of the Patiphone, Tel Aviv's most beloved indie club of the 2000s

Every major city in the world has at least one active independent music scene at any given time. Tel Aviv has had a few of those over the years, but none as well documented as the one that thrived from 2000 to 2009 inside a small, now-defunct club, which I had the pleasure of being part of.

The live shows at the Patiphone (meaning record player), as well as the goings-on at the indie label that spawned it, Fast Music, were obsessively filmed in real time by director, actor, comedian, and music fan, Amit Itzcar, as well as by others. Now Itzcar has compiled this footage into one of the most exciting Israeli music documentaries ever: *Furious and Fast: The Story of Fast Music and the Patiphone*, currently available on Vimeo-on-demand with English subtitles. “Even more exciting than the responses from people who were part of the scene, were the responses from people who never heard of it,” Itzcar told me. “A lot of people told me the film caused them major FOMO.”

It's hard for an alternative scene to flourish in a country like Israel, where even the mainstream is small. Every time a scene like this emerges in Israel and survives for more than five minutes, it feels like a miracle.

—Dana Kessler

public. “I really think that most Israelis do not want America to stay out of their business,” U.S. Ambassador Tom Nides asserted in response to an Israeli minister who criticized his meddling. Sure enough, footage subsequently emerged of demonstrators gratefully welcoming imperial intervention and demanding more of it. A political cartoon disseminated in one of the Herodian faction’s local mouthpieces portrayed the U.S. president in a crowd control vehicle, emblazoned with the American flag, flushing the governing coalition away. While the cartoon may have been wishful thinking, there is no question that the demonstrations by the minority gained considerable strength from the fact that they had secured American backing—making it much more difficult for the elected Israeli government to push back.

As pressure mounted, the democratically elected prime minister eventually balked, suspending his government’s legislation while retaining a defense minister who had openly defied him, showing who actually ran the country. President Biden paraded the humiliation of the undesirable Israeli leader, publicly admonishing him to “walk away” from his own legislation, for he “cannot continue down this road.”

Read more by Tony Badran

In response to the imperial dictum, Netanyahu did belatedly attempt to assert the principle of Israeli sovereignty. “Israel is a sovereign country which makes its decisions by the will of its people and not based on pressures from abroad, including from the best of friends,” he said in a statement. His coalition ally, Itamar Ben-Gvir, was more specific, and expressed concern about a trajectory whose endpoint is imperial province status, stating that Israel “is not another star in the American flag.”

In contrast, Israel’s Herodian faction

“Herod Hellenized his realm and government as much as he could, modeling himself as a Greek monarch and projecting that image abroad.”

had no compunction about verbalizing their conceptualization of Israel’s new relation to the empire, with one describing it as an American “protectorate.” President Biden made sure to publicly announce that Netanyahu would not be invited to come to the imperial capital “in the near term,” while opposition leaders traveled freely to America to meet with Jewish organizations and members of Congress, thereby consolidating the optics of the Herodians as the imperial favorites.

The history of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel is sporadic; relatively brief periods of self-rule in a timeline where vassalage to or domination by successive empires—Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, and finally Roman—is the norm. The arc of Judea’s encounter with Rome is therefore instructive, especially as it marked the last Jewish polity until the establishment of modern Israel. It follows a trajectory that begins with a nominal alliance, followed by client status, then incorporation into the empire as a province, ending in the dissolution and destruction of the state.

The encounter between the Jewish state and Rome began when Judea’s ruling Hasmonean dynasty appealed for Roman support against Seleucid

control. That relationship in turn ended first with direct Roman intervention in 63 BCE, which established Judea as a client kingdom, and eventually with direct Roman control in 6 CE.

Rome’s initial intervention under Pompey took place as the Roman general campaigned in Syria, which he sought to annex and reorganize due to its instability, which made it a potential source of trouble for Rome in the east. The Roman decision to intervene in Judea was spurred directly by the Hasmonean civil war: the struggle for power between Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, sons of the Hasmonean King Alexander Jannaeus.

The Hasmonean kingdom had been useful to Rome as a thorn in the Seleucids’ side. However, with the Seleucids now finished, and Judea ridden with internal strife, its continued independence was a headache that Rome did not need, especially with the potential for Parthian encroachment in the Levant. Pompey backed the aging Hyrcanus as High Priest, though he did not allow him to resume the title of king. But by this point, Hasmonean local autonomy was over. Rome’s true local client was Hyrcanus’ associate, the Idumean chief Antipater, founder of the Herodian dynasty.

The Herodians understood that their position and power depended on Rome and on remaining in its good graces—which included navigating the treacherous ways of Roman power struggles. In this task, the Herodians were as skilled as they were lucky, including in how inept their domestic adversaries proved to be.

Antipater’s son, Herod the Great, received the support of Mark Antony to retake the throne after the Hasmonean Prince Antigonus, Aristobulus’ son, aligned with and was installed by the Parthians who briefly overran Roman Syria in 40 BCE, following the Liberators’ Civil War. That year, as he took refuge in Rome, the Senate bestowed on Herod the title of “allied king and friend of the Roman people.”

Just as his family had managed to navigate the struggle between Pompey and Julius Caesar before, Herod managed to retain the trust and favor of Octavian (Augustus Caesar) after his



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war with Mark Antony, remaining a loyal client of Rome. Herod expressed his loyalty to Augustus, building several structures in Caesar's honor, including an amphitheater in Jerusalem dedicated to Augustus, as well as temples of the imperial cult in Samaria, now named Sebaste in honor of Augustus (the Greek translation of his name), and in Caesarea—a coastal city whose harbor is one of Herod's major building achievements. His grandson, Herod Agrippa, named after Augustus' son-in-law and right-hand man, Marcus Agrippa (who defeated Mark Antony's naval forces), was sent to Rome at an early age and grew up with members and friends of the imperial household.

Herod's physical displays of allegiance to Rome and Augustus were targeted as much at his internal foes as at his Roman patrons. His buildings honoring Augustus served to proclaim that he was Rome's associate and the recipient of its favor—a reminder to his local enemies of who stood behind him.

As a client king, Herod's duty was to assimilate his subjects into the empire, through Greco-Roman culture and forms of administration. Herod Hellenized his realm and government as much as he could, modeling himself as a Greek monarch and projecting that image abroad. Styling himself as a friend of Caesar and on a par with Marcus Agrippa, Herod disbursed significant largesse on the Greek cities of the Mediterranean world, many of which were also home to diasporic Jewish communities. This orientation toward the Greek world provided Herod with an important counterbalance to internal troubles with his Jewish subjects, whose hostility he had to manage and keep under control.

As familiar as Israel's current factional battles might seem to the ancients, it is important to underline a key difference that would leave the emperors of Rome utterly baffled. The Roman interest, and the rationale for its intervention in local Jewish politics, was to guard against encroachment from enemies to the east. Inasmuch as factional strife in Judea could serve the intrigues of the enemies of Rome, the interest of

“As far as the leader of the nationalist-religious coalition is concerned, there is no satisfying the empire's list of demands—which, in fact, is endless.”

the empire was in suppressing Jewish factionalism.

The American empire, under the rule of the Obama faction, has bizarrely inverted this entirely practical rationale. In contrast to Rome's policy, Washington is actively stoking factionalism in Israel, and publicly siding against the faction elected to govern there. What's even more perverse is the purpose of this behavior. Whereas Rome sought to shore up the stability of the imperial realm against outside subversion, the American imperium is promoting the destabilization of an ally in the service of realigning with an American adversary in the east.

Moreover, the U.S. will not reverse this posture should the imperially favored faction return to power. Keeping Israel off balance will remain the policy of the ruling Obama faction irrespective of which Israeli government is in power. In addition to fanning the flames of domestic chaos, the empire is amplifying Israel's internal turmoil by fostering Palestinian low-intensity warfare against Israel, all while demanding the latter cede territory and sovereignty to warring Palestinian factions, some of which are active proxies of the Iranian regime that Washington is looking to align with. The “integration” deal with the Iranian satrapy in Lebanon to the north, which

the U.S. presented for the signature of the short-lived Lapid government, intentionally showcased Israel's vassal status.

As far as the leader of the nationalist-religious coalition is concerned, there is no satisfying the empire's list of demands—which, in fact, is endless. The point of those requests, whether couched in the language of “democracy” or “justice for the Palestinians,” is to cripple the Israeli leader and deny him the ability to interfere with America's design of alignment with his enemy. On the upside, the empire's posture provides clarity as to the path before Israel's nationalist-religious coalition and its leader: either destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure, rendering the American plan moot, or accept vassal status and the erosion of sovereignty.

For those who imagine a third way, in which an accommodating Israeli leadership that continues to meet Washington's demands will steer its way through the shoals of momentary twists and turns in imperial policy to emerge even stronger on the other side, by continuing to send its elite to American schools, the fate of the Herodians argues otherwise. As it turns out, even close personal relationships with the imperial dynasties did little to alter Roman behavior.

Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa, who was raised in the imperial capital, cultivated extensive friendships with the Roman imperial family, having grown up with future Emperor Claudius, whose accession to the throne Agrippa would help promote, and having become close friends with Drusus, the son of the Emperor Tiberius. Agrippa also

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ingratiated himself with Caligula, who would succeed Tiberius. Perhaps the best he could show for that relationship was to narrowly escape the implementation of Caligula's decision to erect his own image in the Jerusalem Temple, just as the emperor officially appointed him to rule over the territory of his uncle, the tetrarch Herod Antipas. Avoidance of the desecration of the Temple may have been thanks to Agrippa's pleas, but it was more likely due to the fact that Caligula was assassinated before his order was carried out.

Agrippa didn't live much longer into the reign of Claudius, his childhood friend. He did, however, live long enough to have Claudius bestow on him the same title as the one Rome bestowed on his

grandfather, "friend of Rome"—in what was now no longer an independent kingdom but a Roman province. In the same year that he confirmed Agrippa as king, Claudius would also deprive the Jews of Rome of their right of assembly. A few years later, he would expel them from the city—as Emperor Tiberius, father of Agrippa's close friend, had done some 30 years earlier.

However well he managed to placate the religious authorities and his Jewish subjects by publicly feigning Jewish piety, Agrippa was a Roman through and through. Like him, his children were Romans at heart, and it was during their time that the Jewish revolt would erupt. His Roman-educated son Agrippa II, who tried to dissuade the Jews from

rebellion, participated on the Roman side in suppressing the revolt. His sister Berenice meanwhile became the lover of Titus, Emperor Vespasian's son, who, as military commander, besieged and sacked Jerusalem in 70 CE. Yet while Titus became emperor after his father, he did not rule Rome with a Jewish wife by his side.

It seems that despite being full Romans, suppressing the Jewish rebellion, destroying the Jewish Temple, and sleeping with the future Roman emperor, the Herodians remained Jews in Rome's eyes, even after the last vestiges of Jewish independence were destroyed. ■

This article was originally published on May 3, 2023.

FOOD

When Shawarma Meets Focaccia, and Pizza Mixes With Lahmajoun

Israeli Arab restaurants are bringing Italian flavors to traditional recipes, and winning over diners with their innovative combinations

BY FLORA TSAPOVSKY

Between Netanya and Haifa, if you drive inland, Routes 6 and 65 outline a triangle of tightly packed, Hebrew-speaking towns and moshavim, as well as several Israeli Arab villages—one of which, Ar'ara, is home to a small culinary gem: Mijana, a restaurant where classic Arab dishes meet Italian flavors. On the menu, diners can find polenta enriched by spiced chicory, risotto with locally hand-picked mallow, and arancini made with freekeh (roasted wheat, which is incredibly popular in Arab kitchens). As

curious as the combination sounds, Mijana isn't alone. All over the country, Israeli Arab chefs have been embracing—and experimenting with—Italian influences.

It makes sense, in more ways than one. It's no secret that the powerhouses of Italian cuisine—pasta and pizza—are intensely beloved and easily lend themselves to cross-pollinations. Case in point is the successful California-based franchise Curry Pizza House, or the fact many fine-dining chefs in the U.S. are starting to get playful with pastas. For Israeli Arab chefs, Italian food represents an opportunity to exercise

creativity that's also historically sound and financially bulletproof.

The seemingly surprising marriage of marinara and harissa can take many shapes, from fast-casual and casual pizzerias and bakeries to elegant restaurants. Mijana walks a fine line between the two, and Omar Elwan, its consulting chef, has been making a solid career out of this culinary direction for the past few years. "The first reaction is oftentimes shock," he said, describing the process of suggesting an Italian twist to his clients: Israeli Arab restaurant owners, chefs, and entrepreneurs. "But then, when they try it and taste it, they see it works!"

Elwan, who also consults to other Arab Italian businesses like Il Forno in Kfar Manda in the lower Galilee and Zest in Haifa, has been on a mission to elevate the cuisine he's grown up on, particularly the Syrian-Halabi recipes his grandma used to cook. Looking toward Italy is currently a



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highly successful strategy to do just that—now. A decade ago, his Haifa restaurant Alei Gefen (“grape leaves” in Hebrew) “was ahead of its time,” Elwan said, for its sophisticated aspirations. Now, energized by Israel’s appetite for culinary TV shows featuring Israeli Arab participants, he’s lending his expertise to other businesses, determined to set the bar high with unusual dishes like labneh panna cotta and fettuccine with shanklish (a Lebanese spiced cheese).

In Tel Aviv, Juvani, an Arabic-Mediterranean restaurant that riffs on Italian classics, is doing the same. The owners, brothers Marwan and Fadi Saman, were born in Rome to Israeli Arab parents who lived and worked in Italy at the time; they returned to Israel, to their father’s native village of Eilabun, in 2002. Their career as business owners had started with the purchase of the first Juvani restaurant, in their hometown, after years of working in the food industry while the two were students. Their desire was to have a fully Italian restaurant that reimagines the flavors of their unusual childhood, but, Fadi said, “in the village, it was difficult to bring *just* Italian food to our sector, so we opened a Middle Eastern restaurant with Italian touches.”

After the pandemic, at their second location, close to Tel Aviv University, the brothers decided to take things one step further. At the Tel Aviv Juvani, the bold friendship between Italian and Arab flavors thrives in dishes like the shawarma focaccia and pizza topped with ground beef and pine nuts—a topping typical of lahmajoun, a flatbread popular in Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. For the brothers, focusing on Italian speaks to their upbringing, but their chosen direction works even outside of its unique context, and has turned out to be a part of a major trend. “These are two cuisines that share a lot of ingredients,” said Fadi. “Both focus on rice, meat, dough, and vegetables such as tomatoes.”

Omar Elwan’s dishes encapsulate a blend of Italian and Arab cuisines Courtesy Omar Elwan

Pizza has been especially effective in bringing the Arab Italian concept to

“Our shishbarak resembles ravioli and tortellini, and arancini is akin to kubeh with rice—these references allow for play and experimentation.”

the Israeli masses. The recently opened Pala Trattoria in the Druze village of Yarka, and a bistro named Toti in Daburiyya, a town close to Nazareth, both offer creative spins on pizza. At Toti, chef Hamui Ibrahim uses Italian pizza dough baked in the taboon as a base for traditional Arab baked goods, such as sfiha and mukaskah, and piles labneh and za’atar on pizzas. There’s even a chicken-and-tomato-topped pizza, which is an homage to manakish, a traditional Arab dish of dough, ground meat, and herbs.

On the other end of the spectrum, Israeli Arab chefs who have risen to prominence in fine dining are embracing the connection, too. In Haifa, the northern city slowly climbing up the Israeli culinary influence pyramid, Eataliano Dalla Costa and Crudo, two eateries showcasing elegant plating and atmosphere, are playing around with Italian flavors, from freekeh arancini and fettuccine served with a lemon-and-harissa-flavored fish skewer, to a “Sicilian chraime,” a Levantine spicy fish stew done with Italian touches.

“The cuisines are very much alike, and, of course, Italian cuisine isn’t just plain Italian—if we’re talking about Sicily, it’s been under Islamic law for a significant amount of time,” Elwan said. “Our shishbarak resembles ravioli and

tortellini, and arancini is akin to kubeh with rice—these references allow for play and experimentation.” What it also does is put Arab-owned restaurants on the map in a new way, for all Israelis.

For Israeli Arab diners, the wave of Arab Italian restaurants caters to newly minted adventurous eaters who are eager to try new things. “There’s definitely more curiosity in the sector,” said Fadi Saman. “People are starting to open up their minds to more special dishes beyond skewers and hummus.”

Elwan notes that Israeli Arab chefs, too, are increasingly motivated by innovation and challenges. “Yesterday I tried, with one of the chefs I consult, a risotto with burnt eggplant cream with brulee, goat cheese, and smoked eggplant jam. It sounds insane, but it was so good,” he said.

For Hebrew-speaking Israelis, the trend has been creating a dynamic draw to Israeli Arab towns previously left off the local culinary tourism map. Il Forno, Mijana, and Toti have received, soon after opening, generous coverage in the mainstream Israeli media, including television segments and food-related podcasts, which isn’t always the case with traditional Arab restaurants. Everyone loves an unlikely combination, and this one succeeds at feeling both intriguing and crowd-pleasingly familiar. ■

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The Hectic, Violent, and Relatively Short Life of Big Jack Zelig

The Lower East Side gangster would shake down shopkeepers before saving elderly Jews from harassment

BY ALLAN LEVINE

Chronicled and mythologized in scholarly and popular history books, novels, films, and plays, New York's Lower East Side in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was overcrowded, and teeming with peddlers, tailors, sweatshops, and barely livable tenement houses. By 1910, an estimated 540,000 Jews resided within the neighborhood's 1.5 square miles. The poverty, hardships, and daily struggle to survive drove some Jewish immigrants to seek other ways to make a living, even get rich. Hence, the Lower East Side also had a vast collection of crooks, pimps, prostitutes, thieves, pickpockets, gangsters, fraudsters, forgers, arsonists, and hoodlums. Offered here and in future articles are portraits of some of these nefarious characters, who also left their mark on the Lower East Side's historical legacy.

"Imagine if a greenhorn fresh from Ellis Island came upon this impressive funeral. He would have surely assumed that it was for a man of great distinction in Israel, perhaps a luminary in the Torah, and if not a respected figure in the community then at least a great philanthropist. So it would be in the old home. How astonished the greenhorn would be to hear that the parade to the cemetery was for a leader of robbers, murderers, and cadets whose greatest virtue was his iniquity."

—*Forverts* (Forward), Oct. 8, 1912

The proverb, derived from the Gospel of Matthew, that those who "live by the sword, die by the sword" was all too true in the hectic, frequently violent, and relatively brief life of Big Jack Zelig. For about four years, from 1908 until he was murdered on a trolley car by a shot in the head from an aggrieved underling on Oct. 5, 1912, at the age of 24, Big Jack was one of the reigning Jewish gangsters of the Lower East Side. He was a man to be feared. As *The New York Times* aptly put it the day after he

was killed, "he had plenty of that kind of courage which is possessed by a man with a revolver and a gang at his heels when dealing with some unarmed opponent and his readiness to use a revolver or knife soon won him a measure of respect in gang circles."

Related

Yet despite his various swindles and shakedowns of Jewish shopkeepers and business owners, he still garnered respect among the East Side's Jews, mainly for protecting elderly and more vulnerable members of the community from assaults and antisemitic harassment. Even Abe Shoenfeld, who was the young chief investigator for the New York Kehilla's Bureau of Social Morals and certainly no fan of the neighborhood's Jewish criminal element, begrudgingly admired Zelig. "At all times he has had the reputation ... as being a good scrapper and above all a man of principle which readily understood is a quality seldom found amongst thieves. You may find honor but never principle," Shoenfeld wrote in August 1912.

He also described the gang leader as having "prevented more hold-ups than a thousand policemen."

Decades later, Judge Jonah Goldstein, who grew up on the East Side and was starting his career as a lawyer when Zelig ruled the area, remembered that Big Jack would literally "beat the stuffings" out of any hoodlum he witnessed bothering a Jew riding a trolley car. Zelig and his gang members "made it possible for the Jews not to get tossed around," said Goldstein.

Thus, Zelig was a bit of an enigma: a ruthless, though stylish, rogue with a soft spot for his fellow Jews—the same people whose pockets he picked, the ones he sold tickets to social events that did not take place, threatened if they did not hand over the "protection" money he demanded, and beat up if they dared do something to displease him. Zelig did not play favorites when it came to making money: He took advantage of the increasing number of labor disputes in New York by offering his "expertise" to garment factory owners and union organizers alike.

He was born as Zelig (or Selig) Zvi Lefkowitz on May 13, 1888, in an East Side tenement, one of nine children of Ephraim (Frank) and Sarah Lefkowitz, two among the thousands of Jewish immigrants from Russia who several years earlier fled the persecution and poverty of the Pale of Settlement for New York City. (The couple first settled in London in 1882 with their infant son Hyman and later relocated to Glasgow. After their arrival in England, Sarah gave birth to another son, Alex. Ephraim journeyed to New York City in 1884 and Sarah and the children eventually joined him.) In New York, Frank made a decent living as a tailor, but young Zelig was restless and by the age of 14 he had joined the small army of teenage pickpockets under the tutelage of one of the East Side's many "Fagins," Simon "Crazy Butch" Erenstoft.

Butch taught his young charges an assortment of tricks, including the "snatch racket," in which he would drive a bicycle into someone walking on the street, which in turn would trigger a commotion. Inevitably a crowd gathered to watch the altercation and, in the

confusion, pockets were professionally picked of wallets and other valuables. Life, however, was tenuous as an East Side thief and—as Herbert Asbury relates the story in his classic 1927 book, *The Gangs of New York*—Butch died in a fight at a pool hall when he was about 22 years old.

Butch answered to one of the first true Jewish gangster bosses of the East Side, Edward (Osterman) Eastman from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, otherwise known as Monk Eastman (his father had changed the family's surname). He looked exactly as you might expect for a nasty and brutish thug: "a bullet-shaped head," "cauliflower ears," and a nose bent out of shape from being frequently broken. Adept at using brass knuckles and blackjacks, Eastman "loved violence for its own sake," writes historian Albert Fried. He was a favorite among Tammany officials for "keeping" voters in line at election time and also worked both sides of labor disputes "strong-arming" for employers as well as strikers.

The Eastman gang, of which Jack Zelig was a member, had a bitter and deadly feud with the Italian-led Five Points gang that erupted in a wild shootout on Second Avenue in August 1903. About six months later, Eastman, while attempting to rob a young man who had a Pinkerton detective as a bodyguard, shot and killed the detective in a fight. For this crime, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. (Later, after he was released and imprisoned again for burglary, Eastman served in the U.S. Army and saw military action in France during America's one-year involvement in WWI. For this service, the state's governor granted him back his citizenship rights. But in 1920, after becoming a bootlegger during the beginning of Prohibition, he was murdered by a federal enforcement officer whom he had a dispute with.)

After Eastman went to prison, his gang was led for a few years by one of his lieutenants, Max Zweifach (or Zwerbach), a 20-year-old Austrian Jewish immigrant who was known as "Kid Twist." To gain control of the gang, Zwerbach, who was as treacherous as his mentor, had his chief rival, Richie Fitzpatrick, a former Five Points gang

"Among the services he offered were: a knife slash on the cheek for up to \$10; a bullet in the leg or arm for up to \$25; throwing a bomb for up to \$50; and murder for up to \$100."

member, murdered. He expanded the gang's protection racket, ensuring that madams and gambling and stuss operators paid what was expected of them and on time (stuss was a version of the card game faro that was popular among Jewish immigrants in New York of this era) and was equally determined to keep the East Side free from Italian and Irish thugs. His rivalry with the Five Points gang ultimately cost him his life in May 1908 when he and one of his men were shot to death at Coney Island by "Louis the Lump" Pioggi. The story was that Kid Twist and Louis the Lump loved the same woman: Carroll Terry, a Canadian-born music hall singer.

With the demise of Monk Eastman and Kid Twist, Big Jack Zelig, who had done stints in reformatories and prisons, was next in succession—though there were challengers—to head the Eastman gang. He had a tough and frequently mean crew watching his back that included "Whitey" Lewis (Jacob Seidenshner), Louis "Lefty Louis" Rosenberg, and Harry "Gyp the Blood" Horowitz (Gyp the Blood was infamous for his "skill" at breaking a man's spine with ease over his knee). Zelig was smart and brought some efficiency, if you could call it that, to his "business." Among the services he offered were: a knife slash on the cheek for up to \$10; a bullet in

the leg or arm for up to \$25; throwing a bomb for up to \$50; and murder for up to \$100. He never lacked for clients willing to pay him and his boys. More importantly, he protected his territory against encroachment by other mainly Italian gangs.

There were dangerous enemies around every corner. Zelig carried on the rivalry with the Five Points gang but was "on mildly friendly terms" (as Zelig's biographer Rose Keefe puts it) with Jack Sirocco and Bowery saloon-keeper Frank "Chick" Tricker. Neither was to be trusted, however. Sirocco's ultimate goal was to replace Zelig as head of the Eastman gang. In late 1908, Zelig added to the bad feelings with the two men, when acting on the orders of Abe Lewis, an Eastman gang leader, he threatened to kill Tricker. But at the last second, Zelig lost his nerve and escaped. He hid out in Chicago for a time. Accompanying him was his common-law wife Henrietta (Young) Zelig—who was eight years older than him—and her young son Harry; she claimed Zelig was the boy's father. They lived in a rented apartment on Broome Street.

More disputes followed. Physical fights ensued and death threats were made. Finally, Sirocco and Tricker had enough and dispatched a gunman-for-hire Julius Morrello (Julie Morrell) to kill Zelig. One night in early December 1911, Morrello showed up inebriated at a casino on Second Avenue planning to murder Zelig. "Where is that big Yid Zelig? I gotta cook that big Yid!" he was reported to have shouted. Zelig was ready for him. According to one version of this story, the lights in the hall went out, shots were fired, and Morrello lay on the floor dead. While Zelig fled the scene, he was eventually apprehended, though no charges were brought against him since there were no witnesses to substantiate that Zelig had been the shooter. The killing of Morrello, however, started a bloody gang war.

In June 1912, a brawl broke out between Zelig, Lefty Louis, Whitey Lewis, and Tricker and members of the Five Points gang. All of the participants were arrested. A short time later, when Zelig was released on bail and departed the courthouse, Charles Torit, an associate

of Sirocco, approached him from behind and shot him in the head behind his ear. Somehow, Zelig survived and while he was recuperating in the hospital his men attacked Tricker and his gang causing much concern among New York City's police and justice officials.

Once Zelig's life was out of danger, he was transferred to the Tombs to await his bail hearing. While there, he later said he was approached (for a second time) by "Bald" Jack Rose (Rosenzweig)—also known as "Billiard Ball" Jack Rose (the nickname was because he was bald, hairless, and pale, rather than about his prowess playing pool), who acted as a money collector for New York City police Lieutenant Charles Becker. By most accounts, the NYPD officer was extorting brothel owners and illegal gambling operations and offering them protection from legal charges. One of the affected gamblers, Herman Rosenthal, objected to Becker's constant money demands and publicly declared his intention to expose him. Rose asked Zelig—allegedly at Becker's behest—to supply four gunmen who would assassinate Rosenthal. Zelig later claimed that he had refused to assist Rose, who he believed was acting on his own accord. In any event, on July 15, 1912, as he left the Metropole Hotel, Rosenthal was murdered by a team of four gunmen all associated with Zelig—Gyp the Blood, Lefty Louis, Whitey Lewis, and Dago Frank (Francesco Cirofici). All four were later convicted of the killing and executed, as was Becker, whose culpability in Rosenthal's murder remains a matter of contention to this day.

Zelig's connection, as tentative as it was, to the Rosenthal-Becker case—without question the greatest scandal of the pre-WWI era—and his scheduled testimony for Oct. 6, 1912, about Jack Rose's request of him to assemble

the gunmen, initially led the police and newspapers to believe that Zelig's murder on the evening of Saturday, Oct. 5, were linked. It is not entirely clear. In one accepted version, it was unrelated events that led "Red" Phil Davidson, a petty thug, to wait for Zelig, follow him onto a trolley car and fire a bullet into the back of his head.

Herman Rosenthal's funeral, 1912 Library of Congress

Davidson was a fruit seller, who was coerced to pay protection money. He became acquainted with some young minor gangsters, who robbed Jewish pushcart peddlers, snatched purses from women on the street, and held up stuss players. He also worked as a pimp and was reputed to be a "horse poisoner." His ambition was to join Zelig's gang. Though Big Jack humored him, he never thought Davidson was tough enough to work for him.

On Friday, Oct. 4, Davidson, who may have been slightly inebriated, approached Zelig at a social function, where Zelig and his friends were drinking and playing cards. Some words were exchanged about who was buying drinks and Davidson left feeling slighted. The next day, he approached Zelig again who was carousing at Segal's Café at 76 Second Ave. More words were uttered and this time, Zelig became annoyed and punched Davidson, who left the café battered and bruised. He returned early in the evening and offered an apology to Zelig for the altercation. Zelig accepted and shook Davidson's hand. But this was not the end of their dispute.

Around 8 p.m. that night, Zelig boarded a Second Avenue streetcar. Davidson, who had retrieved a gun, was waiting for him. As the streetcar slowed, Davidson hopped on its running board and moved sideways until he was close to where Zelig was sitting. Without saying

a word, he took his gun out and shot Zelig in the head. He died a short time later. Davidson leaped off the running board and fled. He was soon arrested by a police officer who had been nearby the shooting. Davidson later claimed that Zelig had robbed and beaten him, yet as Keefe suggests, Davidson "muddled the investigation when he changed key details of his story."

Zelig's fellow gangsters were shocked by the killing and never believed that Davidson was "bold" enough, as *The New York Times* noted, to do the deed. The *Times* reporter also rightly pointed out that if Davidson had been hired by Rose or Becker to kill Zelig, he would have already had a gun with him when he first encountered Zelig that evening. Still, the timing of the murder less than 24 hours before Zelig was to testify in the Becker case remains highly suspicious all these years later. In any event, Davidson was found guilty of murder in the second degree and received a jail sentence of not less than 20 years in Sing Sing prison.

A crowd estimated to be about 10,000, young and old, who regarded Big Jack with a strange awe, gathered near his Broome Street apartment to pay their respects. A choir chanted hymns as the funeral procession passed. "Only the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph [in 1902]," observed Abe Shoefeld, "surpassed this, the funeral of Jack Zelig." For his part, the esteemed editor of the *Forverts*, Abraham Cahan, had a difficult time understanding how someone of Zelig's ilk, "the chief of a gang that for money cracked heads, broke bones and routinely committed murder," was deserving of such deference. He never received a proper answer. ■

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STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

lite against everyone else.... College is pointless... No one's having babies a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left

Apple-Apricot Crostada

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 4** Granny Smith or other good cooking apples
- ½** cup sugar
- 2** sticks unsalted butter or pareve margarine
- 2** large egg yolks
- 1½** cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- Pinch** salt
- ½** cup apricot preserves

PREPARATION

Step 1

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees and grease a 10-inch fluted tart pan with a removable bottom.

Step 2

Peel, core, and slice the apples into crescents about a fourth to an eighth of an inch thick. You should have about 24 pieces.

Step 3

Place the sugar, butter, egg yolks, flour, and salt in a large bowl and press everything together with your fingers or combine the ingredients in a food processor fitted with a steel blade and process until the dough forms a ball. Either way, do not overwork the dough.

Step 4

Take the ball of dough in your hands and flatten in the center of the tart pan. Working with your fingers and a cake knife or wide spatula, spread the dough evenly around the pan and up the sides. The dough should be about ½ inch thick on the sides. Press the dough into the flutes and spread it evenly across the bottom of the pan, then trim and flatten the edges with a knife. Starting on the outside and working toward the center, lay the apple slices in an overlapping, concentric circle.

Step 5

Place the apricot preserves in a saucepan and heat over a low flame until it has liquefied. Using a pastry brush, glaze the apples and the visible crust.

Step 6

Place the tart pan on a cookie sheet and bake in the middle of the oven for 15 minutes. Reduce the oven to 350 degrees and continue cooking until the crust is deep golden brown, about 45 minutes. Bring to room temperature, unmold, and put on a platter or serving dish.