

THE TAB

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NEWS

America's Most Israeli Politician

I like Ted Cruz. Why?

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

Earlier this year, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas was called to testify before the Senate's Judiciary Committee. Ted Cruz, a member of the committee, was there to greet him.

Cruz: Good morning, Secretary Mayorkas.

Mayorkas: Good morning.

Cruz: Is there a crisis at our southern border?

Mayorkas: There's a very significant challenge ...

Cruz: That's a yes or no question. Is there a crisis?

Mayorkas, looking a bit like a man who'd just returned home to find his significant other mid-tryst with a paramour, tilted his head and adjusted his microphone before responding.

Mayorkas: Senator, there's a very significant, there is a very significant challenge that we are facing.

Cruz: Yes or no. Is there a crisis?

Mayorkas: I believe I've addressed that question.

Cruz: So you're refusing to answer.

It was all downhill from there. Cruz, perched over his desk like a peregrine falcon, confronted Mayorkas with a large poster featuring the testimony

of Raul Ortiz, President Biden's chief of Border Patrol, who, last summer, answered the very same question Cruz was posing in the affirmative. The senator pushed the secretary with more barbed inquiries. Sitting erect and visibly uncomfortable, the secretary dodged each one.

Cruz: How many migrants died in 2022?

Mayorkas: Approaching our southern border?

Cruz: Yes.

Mayorkas: Precisely why we are seeking to exclude the smuggling organizations.

Cruz: Do you know the answer? Do you know how many died?

Mayorkas: I do not.

Cruz: You do not? Of course you don't. I know how many died—853 ... You don't even know how many have died! What do you say to the Texas farmers and ranchers who find pregnant ladies dead on their property, who find toddlers dead on their property? What do you say to them?

The secretary tried to respond, but the senator cut him off again and again. Cruz asked how many criminals were able to sneak through the porous border, and how many civilians, Mexican and American alike, were hurt by the gangs

that have made the border their base of operations. It went on for more than 10 minutes, and when time was up, Cruz didn't bother masking his contempt.

Cruz: Mr. Secretary, I want to say to you right now your behavior is disgraceful. And the deaths, the children assaulted, the children raped, they are at your feet. And if you had integrity, you would resign. And I will tell you, the men and women of the Border Patrol, they've never had a political leader undermine them. They despise you, Mr. Secretary, because you're willing to let children be raped to follow political orders. This is a crisis. It's a disgrace. And you won't even admit this human tragedy is a crisis.

The committee's chairman offered Mayorkas one minute to respond, but the secretary refused.

Mayorkas: What the senator said was revolting. I'm not going to address it.

Cruz: Your refusal to do your job is revolting.

It was like a courtroom scene by Aaron Sorkin, but the media reporting on the incident left little room for doubt as to which of the two men was the nefarious Colonel Jessup and who the valiant Lieutenant Kaffee. "Ted Cruz erupts," reported *Newsweek*, while the senator's own hometown paper, the *Houston Chronicle*, accused him of shouting down the secretary and Salon alerted its readers that the senator was "slammed for 'revolting' hearing claim."

Watching the exchange, I saw something different. Maybe it was the adversarial body language. Maybe it was the verbal throwdown, and the pleasure he seemed to take in sparring in front of the cameras. Maybe it was his anger, which felt real and profound. Whatever it was, at that moment Ted Cruz looked and sounded to me like America's most Israeli politician.

There is, of course, the unmistakably Israeli bombast—which some find refreshing, but many others, including Republicans, find highly unlikable, or even repellent. In 2016, when fellow Republican John Boehner called Cruz "Lucifer in the flesh," a spokesman for The Satanic Temple quickly released a statement saying that the group wanted "nothing to do" with the senator. In 2018, Cruz defeated his opponent,

Beto O'Rourke, by only about 215,000 votes, the narrowest margin Texas has seen in three decades. In 2021, a *New York Times* profile was titled "How Ted Cruz Became the Least Sympathetic Politician in America"—a headline that turned no heads because it simply stated what many people already thought.

With the 2024 election upon us, the MAGA crowd is cheering for the second coming of its demon emperor, the "marauder of Mar-a-Lago." The "intellectual right" (increasingly conflated with the "very online right") is hailing Ron DeSantis as Trump with a better brain. Team Haley waxes poetic about civility and a return to basics. There is no competing choir of sycophants lamenting Cruz's apparent decision to sit out presidential politics this time and focus instead on "keeping Texas red."

But there is also a deeper level on which Cruz calls to mind political actors from the Jewish state, most recently but not only in that exchange with Mayorkas. When Trump talks about the border, his signature issue, it's usually in hollow and inflamed propositions, saying things like "build the wall" or complaining that America is flooded by bad hombres. When DeSantis talks about the border, he sounds like he's firing straight out of the think tank, issuing proposals like Florida's Senate Bill 1718 that would require employers to use special software to verify the eligibility of employees and impose fines on those who fail to comply. You can argue about the efficacy of such proposals, but read it—or any other statement by DeSantis—and you won't find much by way of moral outrage, because the Florida governor is an instrumentalist who sees nothing but problems calling out for solutions, which requires little more than his hand on the levers of power. Nor will you find much moral outrage in Trump, a man who strikes even his most ardent supporters as a cynical nihilist who may occasionally wage and win the right fights but rarely, if ever, for the right reasons.

Not so Cruz. Clashing with Mayorkas, he was not only tossing around facts and figures about the border with a debater's—or a trial lawyer's—command. He seemed genuinely incensed by what

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BY DANA KESSLER



he viewed as a *moral wrong*: The laws being ignored, America's sovereignty and security being compromised, and, most important, throngs of innocents suffering as a result of bad policies. His wasn't the rage politicians manufacture when they're mugging for the cameras. His was the sort of rage you see in church, or shul, or wherever good and evil are still earnestly discussed. Because Cruz's vision of America's future isn't merely a set of arguments about policies and prescriptions. It's rooted in a sense of calling from on high, the belief that the nation was divinely chosen to shine a light unto the nations, a singular and sacred mission that makes each failure feel that much more searing and urgent.

It's easy to miss it, especially if you don't have the benefit of being an immigrant and growing up with a radically different political framework, but Ted Cruz is practicing a different kind of politics, and—like it or hate it—it's an interesting departure from the *modus vivendi* that got us into this gridlock. As you might've noticed, political ascent in America no longer conforms to old ideas about political norms, personal likability, or partisan fealty. The Roman-like caesar who can employ personal magnetism to seduce the masses and flights of intellectual oratory to impress the elites is extinct in America. There is more room now for an Old Testament figure—the castigated believer who lives alone with his vision for years in the wilderness before it's his time. Perhaps there is space, in other words, for a kind of politician that still strikes many Americans as weird, even annoying, but which Israelis understand and sympathize with instinctively—the covenantal kind.

Try not to laugh—but that, my friends, is Ted Cruz.

Cruz's political faith was forged at the knee of his father, Rafael. The elder Cruz was born in Matanzas, a shore town about 50 miles east of Havana. The name means “massacre,” a testament to a 1510 rebellion involving local fishermen drowning Spanish conquistadors in the bay, and the spirit of uprising was alive and well in Cruz senior. As a teenaged boy in the late 1950s, he was militating

“Ted Cruz is practicing a different kind of politics, and—like it or hate it—it's an interesting departure from the *modus vivendi* that got us into this gridlock.”

against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. He was a follower of Fidel Castro along with Che Guevara—the future dorm room icon of the third worldist politics that Ted Cruz would spend his days skewering on Twitter, the elitist social media website to which the senator is firmly addicted.

After a brief stint in jail, Rafael Cruz managed to obtain a student visa to study at the University of Texas. He came to America with \$100 sewn into his underwear. He learned English from going to movies, which he could afford only by taking a string of dishwashing jobs. He also spoke passionately at every Rotary and Kiwanis club that would have him, convincing his new friends and neighbors to lend their ears and dollars to the *Revolución*. Later, he would make a point of revisiting all these same venues and apologizing, admitting that Castro's regime was a hideous tyranny. The only way to oppose it, he now preached, was through faith and freedom, the twin pillars on which the United States of America was erected.

And not just the United States. Ted Cruz says he was kneeling in front of his TV set at the age of 5 when he saw the first reports of a daring raid halfway across the world: Israeli commandos had landed in Entebbe, Uganda, rescued 102 out of 106 civilians taken hostage by

Palestinian and German terrorists, and eliminated all seven hijackers as well as more than 100 Ugandan soldiers assisting them before safely returning to Israel. The memory of the news bulletins he saw that day would stay with him for the rest of his life.

“To me, and this is a 5-year-old looking at it, what the Entebbe raid told me about Israel was that you may take Israeli citizens hostage, and if you do, those Israelis may lose their lives, but you're gonna die,” the senator told me as we rolled down the highway together in the back of a pickup truck on a recent Sunday in his home state. “And to me, that was a very Texas foreign policy.”

As he grew up, Cruz maintained his passion for policy, conviction, and the ways they interact. He graduated from Princeton and Harvard Law School—both times magna cum laude—and took off a few clerkship positions, including with Chief Justice William Rehnquist. In private practice, he was involved in preparing the case for Bill Clinton's impeachment, and in the aftermath of the shambolic 2000 election, he helped assemble the Republican team to argue *Bush v. Gore*, for which he was rewarded with a handful of administration positions. In 2003, he became Texas' solicitor general, and made national headlines for appearing before the Supreme Court and successfully defending the constitutionality of a monument depicting the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the state capitol.

He had a similar high profile case in 2004, this time arguing against a challenge to the Pledge of Allegiance. Then, in 2012, after another stint in private practice, he ran as the Tea Party's candidate in the Republican Party's primaries, and won. *The Washington Post* called his accomplishment “the biggest upset of 2012,” and Cruz had no problem crushing his Democratic opponent in the general elections. His decade of service in the Senate won him no friends, with most of his party's senior leaders repeatedly criticizing his language and legislative proposals alike as being beyond the pale of politics as usual, most notably his enthusiastic championing of the 2013 federal government shutdown. He made a strong

showing in his 2016 bid for president, but was bested by Trump and chose to cooperate with the president despite being the target of some of Trump's most rank insults. In 2021, he was among the leaders of the effort to delay the electoral vote on January 6 to allow Republican lawmakers in six states more time to contest Biden's election following allegations of voting fraud. When a pro-Trump gaggle stormed the Capitol, Cruz issued repeated condemnations, but has since emerged as a staunch voice for arguing that the FBI and the Department of Justice are applying what he called "wildly disparate standards" in handling the January 6 culprits as opposed to rioting members of antifa and Black Lives Matter.

At some point in this long and storied career, Cruz became best known, and derided by Congressional colleagues in both parties, as an obnoxious know-it-all who believes he was chosen by God for some mission—which isn't wrong.

"There are two nations and only two nations on Earth that were formed as havens for those fleeing persecution and seeking freedom," Cruz told me. "America and Israel. Israel's very existence, the modern State of Israel was formed so that Jews across the globe would have a place to which they could go, to flee if need be the horrific scourge of antisemitism that has cursed history for millennia, to flee the immediate atrocity of the Holocaust. And, like Israel, America was also founded by people fleeing religious oppression, fleeing those that would not allow them to live according to their faith, according to their conscience. And we came to a new land where our nation was founded on the proposition that Jefferson famously penned: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' Those are extraordinary words. Those were revolutionary words, and only America and Israel embody that promise."

When Cruz speaks like this, it is easy to hear his father talking. Speaking in Washington, D.C., in 2014 after being introduced by his famous son, Rafael

Cruz thundered that America's future is intertwined with its faith, and that, just like ancient Israel, it will rise or fall only if it is wise to tether its policies to its religious beliefs.

"When Judea had a righteous king or Israel had a righteous king, the whole country followed the Lord," he said. "When Israel or Judea had a wicked king, the whole country went to idolatry. As the government went, so went the people... I think we cannot separate politics and religion; they are interrelated. They've always been interrelated."

It's a worldview that clarifies the bitter acrimony between Cruz, his colleagues, and his opponents. Instrumentalist conservative politicians who believe they can be crafty and cold-blooded enough to transform or outmaneuver Washington politics—a gelatinous blob where federal bureaucrats, tech companies, corporate and industry lobbies, and other interested parties melt into each other for the benefit of the few and the frustration of the many—usually don't last for very long or make much of an impression. A Republican who wants not only to win elections but also to positively transform American politics, Cruz believes, needs to be covenantal—the way Reagan was.

Just what does Cruz mean by covenantal, a term that ordinarily has no concrete political meaning? The concept, like all deeply held beliefs, is intricate, but it comes back to the idea that a nation might—or could—exist in a covenantal relationship with God, an idea that he also applies to the United States. If you believe, like woke progressives do, that America is steeped in the original sin of slavery and can only redeem itself by prostrating before the rest of the planet; or if you believe, like Curtis Yarvin, the influential blogger who is a Machiavelli for the MAGA crowd, that the only way to cure America of its ills is to erect a European-style monarchy stateside; or if the idea of a covenant between God and particular nations and peoples (and not others) strikes you as a thinly disguised form of murderous ethnic exceptionalism, you likely think of Cruz as either a

hypocrite or a dangerous lunatic, and probably as some mixture of both.

But if, on the other hand, you're not a political player but merely a normal American voter—like, say, the 4.2 million Texans who handed Cruz his reelection in 2018—Cruz's covenantalism is a major draw, a foundational pillar of a belief system that reaffirms the Founding Fathers' convictions and sees America as a special place. And covenants, unlike contracts, aren't a one-and-done deal; they have to be reaffirmed every century or so, and no reaffirmation is like the other. Americans entered the covenant when they fought for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They renewed it again about 100 years later when they waged civil war so that all, and not some, may be free, and then again a century hence to finish the sacred work of civil rights. If you believe it's time to step up and renew the covenant—not only assert a set of narrowly held ideological convictions, but once again charge America with the mighty spiritual current that shocked it into birth and kept the city on the hill illuminated, Ted Cruz promises something much more precious than winning at politics—he promises a very different politics.

Menachem Begin, Ariel Sharon, Re-chavam Ze'evi, Yitzchak Rabin—these

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men weren't "politicians" in any way that corresponds with the contemporary American understanding of this term. They didn't enter the public arena only because they were obsessed by power, nor did they have clear ideological convictions that mapped onto obvious partisan divides. These (largely secular) men had something else, though: an almost mystical belief in their country's covenantal destiny, and an understanding of themselves as custodians of a special national mission handed down from history, or tradition, or God. Their job wasn't just to win elections, as they saw it, but to implement a vision determined by a higher authority—meaning if they had to first spend decades as figures of ridicule and hatred before achieving their goal, that was just fine. Begin, leader of the hard-core Irgun and enemy of David Ben-Gurion, emerged after decades in opposition to lead the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt and Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. Rabin, forced to resign in disgrace in 1977 after he was implicated in a personal financial scandal, emerged 15 years later as the unlikely herald of talks with the Palestinians that came closer than any before or since to establishing peace. Sharon, also forced to resign in disgrace in 1983 after he was implicated in Begin's disastrous Lebanon war, emerged 18 years later as the unlikely leader of the Israeli withdrawal and disengagement from Gaza.

These unlikely turns of history can easily strike an observer as the work of some higher power, which is precisely what Cruz believes about much of American history. "I do believe God's providential hand has been on America from our founding," he told me. "Just look at the extraordinary assemblage of geniuses who came together in America's founding to author our Constitution and lead our government."



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This worldview, he told me as we were making our way to church on a Sunday morning, is why he views Israel as a religious question. And he believes, he added, that his Democratic opponents do, too.

"It's a morality play," he says, of the current administration's policy approaches to the Jewish state. "They live in the war of good guys and bad guys in their world. And it's bizarro land. The good guys are the people who hate America. The bad guys are the people who like America. When the radical left looks at Israel, they see the Iranians as good guys and the Israelis as bad guys and all of their policy decisions flow from that worldview. What do they want to see? They want to see a Palestinian Jerusalem. What do they want to see? They want to see Israel cease to be a Jewish state because its existence as a Jewish state is noxious to them."

"Mind you," he continues, "they don't care about the human rights abuses of Iran. They don't care about the human rights abuses of China. They don't care about the human rights abuses of Russia. But Israel, the only Jewish state on the face of the planet? That is worthy of American taxpayers paying to fund racist NGOs to try to undermine it."

On at least one occasion, Cruz watched giddily as these conflicting worldviews were embodied on the steps of the Knesset. In 2014, a year after assuming office, he traveled to Israel and was scheduled to spend time with then Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. The day before the meeting, Barack Obama's ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, called to say that he would like to join the meeting. Cruz refused. The trip, he said, was a private one, and the meeting was a private meeting, and the ambassador wasn't invited. Shapiro threatened to pull security; Cruz laughed and said he could hire his own private guards, and, besides, that he didn't believe for a moment that the Obama administration was foolish enough to risk a U.S. senator being in a significant security incident. He was calling Shapiro's bluff.

"We were literally bumping chests," Cruz says, "like junior high kids. He backed out the next day."

It's a story that would please those on

both parties who understand American politics as a contact sport, and understand Cruz as a GOP attack dog. And yet, later the same year, Cruz showed a radically different side: He had filed an amendment to restore American funding for Israel's Iron Dome defense system, and worked vigorously to secure bipartisan support.

"At that point," he says, "Harry Reid, then the Senate majority leader, made an extraordinary demand. One that I've never before or since seen in the Senate. Reid told me, Ted, your amendment will pass into law, but only if you pull your name off of it and make it no longer your amendment. And only if you give it to Michael Bennett, a Democrat from Colorado, who's up for reelection, so that he can claim it's his amendment, word for word, the amendment you drafted. If he can submit it as his amendment, we'll pass it in the law. I've never before or since seen that happen in the Senate, but my objective was the substance, not worrying about who gets credit for it. So I said, great. If it'll pass, give it to Bennett. I don't know of another thing he's done in the Senate, so he can pass my amendment if that's what he wants to do. And that's what happened."

After church at Houston's First Baptist, Cruz and I grab a cup of coffee and go shooting. It's a pursuit that Cruz both enjoys and is good at, still an advantage for anyone seeking office in Texas. This is true even—or especially—after the recent law enforcement failure in the small Texas town of Uvalde, when over a dozen armed policemen waited outside a school for an hour while a lone killer methodically murdered at least 19 schoolchildren and two teachers inside.

Like Israel, Cruz's understanding of the issue of guns is providential: The Second Amendment is part of the foundational pact that created the American people, which is the Constitution of the United States. Attempts to replace that foundational pact with ever-changing, up-to-date notions of "the common good," or to suggest that the Constitution is only a bunch of words written on paper by fallible men (including slaveholders), are profoundly mistaken. Where the state's senior

senator, John Cornyn, made himself a pivotal figure in a so-called “gun control” compromise in the Senate that watered down some Second Amendment protections, Cruz took the opposite tack, putting forward a bill that would strengthen the ability of schools to protect students by responding forcefully to armed intruders. Which presumes, of course, the ability of responders to shoot back.

More than anything else, Saddle River, Houston’s fanciest shooting range, resembles an upscale California wine store, only instead of pinots and cabs the wares on offer are Rugers and Glocks and every form of weapon or accessory you could possibly desire. Friday is date night at the in-house Café 2A, kids are welcome, and the friendly staff emit nothing of the typical short-tempered ruggedness you usually find in establishments like these.

We walk past the display and over to the back, where golden letters announce that we’re about to enter Club Crocket. Inside are leather sofas, personalized mahogany lockers, and all the other attributes of an upscale private club. But the senator is not here to socialize; he’s here to enjoy the arsenal in the small hardback case one of his aides just carried into the shooting lane.

He asks me which I’d like to shoot first. My eyes rest on a .357 revolver, which, when fired, makes you feel, in slow motion, every step of the bullet’s journey from drum to target. It’s the gun he’d bought his wife, Heidi, the senator tells me; with no safety or additional complications, it’s a simple point-and-shoot, perfect for home defense and less experienced operators.

As I toy around with the revolver, taking pleasure in what still feels like the equivalent of putting on a vinyl record in a world increasingly dominated by high-tech streaming music devices, the senator picks up an M4 carbine with a suppressor and a green laser sight. When you hold a semi-automatic, and you’ve watched a few action movies, you’re always tempted to just flip that switch and let it rip, channeling your inner Chuck Norris for a few seconds, shooting from the hip and grooving along with the barrel. But the senator doesn’t

“When I take the Staccato I quickly realize it’s like nothing else I’ve ever fired, a smooth and flat machine that all but eliminates the annoying bits of handling handguns.”

lose discipline; he takes his time, aims, readjusts the rifle against his shoulder, squeezes the trigger. A minute or two later, he pushes the button to retrieve the targets and inspect his efforts: tight little batches, half an inch or so up and to the left of dead center, a neat feat of shooting.

We sweep the floor of the spent casings, and are just about ready to leave—we’ve been here for nearly an hour, and the protective gear we’re wearing is getting hot and tight. But the senator wants me to try out one more firearm: It’s his pride and joy, a 9 mm made for him by the Texas-based gun maker Staccato. It’s a limited edition, with the senator’s name and the American flag engraved into the metallic surface. I’ve been shooting guns for nearly 40 years now, but when I take the Staccato I quickly realize it’s like nothing else I’ve ever fired, a smooth and flat machine that all but eliminates the annoying bits of handling handguns, like muzzle rise, and makes you feel like you’re on board the Millennium Falcon, shooting Han Solo’s blaster rather than a piece of equipment designed according to principles that remain largely unchanged for more than a century.

The analogy entertains the senator, a big sci-fi nerd whose literary diet growing up consisted largely of Tolkien, Asimov, and Heinlein. In part, it’s

because his understanding of American politics remains deeply informed by the double helix of our modern American mythology, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. In a 2015 interview, he told a mildly hostile *New York Times* reporter that James Tiberius Kirk, the original captain of the Enterprise, was a Republican, while Jean-Luc Picard, his successor on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, was a Democrat.

“Let me do a little psychoanalysis,” he said. “If you look at *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, it basically split James T. Kirk into two people. Picard was Kirk’s rational side, and William Riker was his passionate side. I prefer a complete captain. To be effective, you need both heart and mind ... The original *Star Trek* was grittier. Kirk is working class; Picard is an aristocrat. Kirk is a passionate fighter for justice; Picard is a cerebral philosopher. The original *Star Trek* pressed for racial equality, which was one of its best characteristics, but it did so without sermonizing.”

This move—weaving together contemporary politics and pop culture detritus to create a bigger theory of everything—is another Cruz specialty, which parallels and at times exceeds his embrace of religion. Last year, when Disney fired the actress Gina Carano from its hit *Star Wars* show *The Mandalorian* after she expressed conservative views on social media, the senator came to her defense.

“Texan Gina Carano broke barriers in the Star Wars universe,” Cruz tweeted. “Not a princess, not a victim, not some emotionally tortured Jedi. She played a woman who kicked ass & who girls looked up to. She was instrumental in making Star Wars fun again. Of course Disney canceled her.”

Cruz’s critics were enraged. Daisy Ridley herself, the *Star Wars* franchise’s latest heroine, felt compelled to jump into the political fray and warn the conservative interloper to stay in his lane and keep out of cultural fields that no longer welcome his kind. But Cruz doesn’t care. Unlike many of his colleagues on the GOP, for whom America is now starkly divided into the woke and the based, two warring tribes, each with its brands and heroes and elected affinities,

Cruz keeps saying that he believes in a shared America. He believes, too, in the possibility of coming together, and in the ability of rational, informed debate to sway opinions and perceptions.

“I tell my staff so much, they’re sick of hearing it already,” he says as we climb back into the truck and begin the long drive home to Houston. He doesn’t even have to finish the sentence. His aides in the front seat do it for him. “Hearts and minds,” they say, almost in unison, freely rolling their eyes.

“Hearts and minds,” the senator repeats, smiling. “Republicans and conservatives spend far too much time preaching to the choir, talking to the same 2.6 million people watching Fox News. We need to spend a lot more time talking to young people, to Hispanics, to African Americans, to suburban moms.”

Anyone who thinks this is all just bluster was treated to a surprising display earlier this month when Cruz came out—full-throatedly—against Uganda’s punitive anti-gay bill, calling it “horrific and wrong” and stating that “all civilized nations should join together in condemning this human rights abuse.” The statement won Cruz no favors from his detractors—MSNBC’s headline simply read “Ted Cruz cleared the lowest bar possible for LGBTQ rights”—but Cruz wasn’t in it for the applause. When Tom Ascol, a prominent Florida pastor, challenged the senator on Twitter for calling what Ascol referred to as God’s law—citing the Old Testament prohibition on homosexual sex between two men—Cruz responded forcefully.

“Jesus told us to ‘render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ We are talking the laws of man, not the Old Testament laws of God. Do you really believe that the US govt should execute every person who is gay??”

He was just getting started. Leviticus, he continued, also prohibited disrespecting one’s parents. “Should the govt execute every child who’s disrespectful to his parents?” he tweeted at Ascol. “That ignores Grace & the New Testament. As our Savior taught us, ‘let he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.’” The exchange led to more rancor from conservatives

online, who took Cruz to task for what they saw as taking the wrong side in the culture war. Figures like Lauren Witzke, who ran as the GOP’s candidate for Senate in Delaware in 2020 and remains a prominent far-right pundit, tweeted at the senator, arguing that the more people identify as LGBTQ, the higher suicide rates surge. “Get real, Ted,” she wrote. “Be a man and focus on being a father, and stay out of our way as we try to save this country.” Cruz didn’t budge.

It’s now late in the afternoon, and the senator is winding down. He is still speaking in full paragraphs as he details his efforts to stop Nord Stream 2—the massive natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany that is a main source of financing for Vladimir Putin—but he’s slower now, and there’s much yet to do in the day. His oldest daughter needs to be driven to her soccer practice, and then it’s back to D.C., where his presence is required at an early morning meeting, which means missing the Sunday evening basketball game that is his chief source of relaxation.

But I’m struggling with something. The Israeli giants I’m used to back home didn’t go to fancy colleges. They didn’t send their kids to tawny schools. They took pleasure in shunning anything and anyone that smacked of elitism, which is why Ariel Sharon lived on a farm and Rechavam Ze’evi, even as minister, refused any measure of secret service protection, a decision that eventually cost him his life—he was assassinated by Palestinian terrorists outside his Jerusalem hotel room in 2001. And here was Ted Cruz, who reminded me so much of these men in so many ways, yet was also very much a recognizable member of the meritocracy. So I decide to pounce.

It’s funny, I say to him, you keep going on about how universities are centers of left-wing indoctrination, yet you wear your Princeton class ring and I know for a fact you haven’t missed a single big reunion. You’re Mr. Right-Wing Populism, but you send your kids to a progressive elite private school. Your father, who is not only your hero but also a frequent campaign surrogate, keeps saying that you didn’t go to Washington to compromise, and here you are talking about

bipartisanship. If you truly believe the Democrats are so brainwashed and the left is so bad and that everything they touch, from academia to Hollywood, is irredeemably corrupt, why not blow it all up? Why not tell Princeton where to put its class rings, and start planning for a national divorce?

“Never,” Cruz responds. Universities, he tells me, are indeed a mess, but he’d still encourage young people to get what they can out of them. Popular culture is filled with propaganda, but it should be grappled with, not abandoned. Everything will be all right in the end, not because of the mechanics of politics, but because the politics we obsess over on Earth—and at which Cruz himself excels—don’t account for larger providential designs.

Can we make room for such faith in our current and grim political moment? Can we let go of our partisan zealotry long enough to start believing that America is different, and that in America—to appropriate Ben-Gurion’s favorite quip about Israeli politics—being a realist means fully expecting miracles? Can we, Jews especially, hear what Ted Cruz is saying above the sound and the fury of cable news rancor?

Even though we’re parked in his driveway and he’s late for carpool duties, he leans in and delivers one more speedy sermon. “I do believe God’s providential hand has been on America from our founding,” he says. “Every time in the history of our nation when we have faced extraordinary challenges, the American people have risen to the occasion. That is based on the character of the American people. It is based on the extraordinary values behind this nation and in its base. And I hope we will continue to enjoy God’s providential blessing.” ■

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 **NEWSLETTER**

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THE REST

→ Antitrust regulators are already eyeing up the **merger between the PGA Tour and Saudi Arabia-financed upstart LIV Golf** that was announced on Tuesday, with Bloomberg citing unnamed sources close to U.S. antitrust enforcers who see the move “as a brazen play loaded with red flags, not the least of which is creating a giant monopoly in an industry that had only recently gained a competitor.” At least for now the blockbuster deal has halted the contentious legal battle waged between the two rivals over the past year, though the announcement caught many in the sports world by surprise as top **PGA Tour players and executives have regularly raked LIV as an attempt by Saudi officials to “sport wash” their shoddy human-rights record.** “Nothing like finding out through Twitter that we’re merging with a tour that we said we’d never do that with,” golfer Mackenzie Hughes wrote online.

→ Some of **California’s largest insurance companies said they will no longer take on new customers for business, personal property, or casualty insurance as the risks of extreme weather events have become too much of a burden on their bottom line.** Citing “historic increases in construction costs outpacing inflation” along with the “rapidly growing catastrophe exposure,” State Farm, which holds 20% of the Golden State’s home insurance policies, will turn down new applicants going forward and might limit how many current customers it renews in the future. Last week, California’s fourth-largest insurance provider, Allstate, confirmed to the San Francisco Chronicle that it would follow State Farm’s lead, with the cost to insure new homes “far higher than the price they would pay for policies due to wildfires,” said an Allstate representative.

→ A Glendale, California, **school board meeting over LGBTQ content in the classroom ended in violent clashes between Antifa members and parents from the Hispanic and Armenian communities** in the district. Authorities arrested three people involved in the confrontations that followed growing concern among parents who had taken kids out of school after the district started integrating gender content across various class lessons and hosting an increasing number of Pride events and celebrations in June. Video coverage of the skirmishes showed parents trading blows with protestors waving rainbow flags before police could break up the fighting.

→ Quote of the Week: **“Thanks Tim, quick question: can we use this to literally live inside our memories of the past as the present crumbles around us?”** That’s writer David Polansky tweeting about the new promo video from Apple CEO Tim Cook as the company announced its \$3,500 mixed-reality headset, the first major hardware product from Apple in almost a decade. Dubbed the Vision Pro, the product promises users to help them “remember how valuable every moment in life can be.”

→ On Saturday morning, an **Egyptian gunman crossed the Israeli border and killed two soldiers** standing guard. A subsequent firefight left the gunman and another Israeli soldier killed. While the attacker’s motive remains unclear, he has been identified as a 22-year-old member of the Egyptian military police stationed on the Sinai-Israeli border who had a **history of erratic behavior and complaints about his service.** The Egyptians initially claimed he had crossed the border in pursuit of drug traffickers, and blamed the two shootings—separated by hours—on the “chase,” though it’s now clear that was merely a face-saving statement.

THE BIG STORY

Cities across the nation saw their skylines vanish and their states issue air-quality warnings as smoke from hundreds of Canadian wildfires drifted south over the border on Wednesday. Officials along the entire East Coast and in several Midwestern states warned millions that the particles circulating in the thick, acrid air could be dangerous, prompting schools to cancel outdoor activities while stores struggled to keep masks and air purifiers on the shelves. The hazy skies were particularly thick in New York, which notched the unfortunate honor of the world’s second-worst air quality on Wednesday, falling just behind smog-ridden Delhi, India, according to air-quality index IQAir.

Forecasts showed that some eastern states could be shrouded in a haze all the way through Friday as the smoke continues to drift south from the hundreds of fires that have burned for weeks, largely in Quebec. Some 10,000 residents in and around Quebec have had to flee their homes while Canadian firefighters, aided by crews from France and the United States, fought the raging flames. Two storm systems, one near Nova Scotia and another swirling around New England, helped usher the smoke over the border, though they didn’t necessarily dissipate the haze in Canada, where high-risk warnings will likely remain in place through Thursday.

—Sean Cooper

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A Farewell to Armbands

I look back to the heady days of anything-goes postmodernism, when I was a rock star with a taste for fascist drag. Why did I do it?

BY CARLOS DENGLER

S ometime in 2004, the British pop music tabloid *New Musical Express* set aside a whole page in its table of contents to display a black-and-white photo of me looking straight at the camera in my usual performance outfit. “Why is Carlos from Interpol Dressing Like a Nazi?” read the headline, a not untypical, barely disguised attempt to arouse a scandal. Interpol, a band you might have heard of, were conducting a new world tour to promote their second album. I was cofounder, bassist, and keyboardist of the band, and, much to the perennial glee of magazine editors, a flamboyant dresser. But never mind that the interview never once asked me about my stylistic choices. Weeklies like these were bought and sold on visuals and I supplied many. They paid their bills covering enfants terribles, “rock ’n’roll bad boys” with spectacles to share—though usually not of the fascistic sort.

I didn’t want to admit it, but *NME’s* coverage of my look, though obviously sensationalistic, was nevertheless apposite: I needed to be real with myself. Indeed, why was I doing it? Of all the dark looks I could’ve chosen, why did I pick a version so influenced by Nazi style?

Let’s start with the most notorious item I ever wore, the piece that captivated music and fashion lovers during my aughts-era limelight: the army-style holster. I was visiting my tailor one day when I first saw it draped over a black shirt on a mannequin. I noted its clean lines and militaristic sheen. A rush of

dopamine, like I’d had my first shot of whiskey or snort of coke, rushed through my synapses, and I felt the palpable euphoria of artistic inspiration. Immediately the entire outfit crystallized: Under the holster a starchy monochrome button-down—along the sleeve would be pinned a pseudomilitary armband, through the collar a short, black tie—the ensemble would be weighted with a pair of black, 12-hole combat boots and on top of my head, a frozen sweep of hair combed in the *Hitlerjugend* style. It would be a jacketless affair connoting movement and mobilization—less high-class, ranked SS officer, more streetwise, brownshirt pamphleteer. Lurid images, scenes of conquest, flashes of lightbulbs danced through my mind.

Could this be kink, I thought, something close to the intended effect of S&M? I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t have much experience with S&M, though I was now feeling something close to a sexual charge. I was being acted upon by an illicit suggestion. Stretching the holster open and poking my hands through the armholes felt like putting on a brassiere, constraining but empowering. The hint of cross-dressing added another layer of intrigue.

Yes, I was beginning to mount a play. It would be the story of the Ambiguous Nazi, a familiar figure in the history of punk music. I was going to take it up in punk’s aftermath, in the context of Interpol’s success. I was feeling a little like *The Wall’s* Pink, the lonely hero who becomes a rockstar and then a demagogue. The shared monumentalism of the two arenas was perfectly spelled out in that

movie. As the demagogue casts spells, so does the rockstar. Both insulate you from accountability. Everyone would see my play on the Jumbotron: How else to feel about it all other than optimistic?

Fede Yankelevich

The armband had no symbols on it. This would be a merely beautiful fascism—anonymous, decorative, neutral. The silver rings on my hands would nod to the roots in punk, not in history. The combat boots were modern. There was plenty here to establish this was drag, not reenactment. I was paying attention to lines, not to ideas. Pesky reminders, the events of history, the proof of the ugliness behind the beauty, were beside the point. I only wanted mood, not words. I would tell this story in silent panels, a comic strip with empty speech bubbles.

If you’d told me back then that I needed to answer for what my holster was saying, I would’ve said that it’s not “saying” anything, that it was apolitical and beautiful. To me this meant that it needed to be seen: How can something be beautiful if it isn’t observed? The galaxy of influences and references playing in my sensorium were from sexuality and subculture, not politics and history. There was the iconic punk band Joy Division (ironically named for the prostitution wing of a concentration camp). I recalled my time frequenting the Goth scene, where I once, or maybe even twice, saw someone wearing a rosary, a military armband, and a black, vinyl corset in the same outfit.

I smirked like a bad little boy when I thought of how Blixa Bargeld, the singer for the industrial noise group Einstürzende Neubauten, seemed to tease the punitive optics of the sex slave, with his tight leather onesie and large belt with a buckle that looked like a cock ring. The feel of the holster I wore registered this inversion of dom to sub: I’d picked it for how it signaled power, and yet—with the way it constrained me—I felt it tugging on me like a leash.

It was all a recitation, a voicing of the aesthetics of sensuality and the erotics of control, something Susan Sontag astutely captured in her critical description of S&M lifestyle in “Fascinating Fascism”: “The color is black,

the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.” Had someone read those words to me at the time, I would have agreed, but followed it with a shrugging, Seinfeldian “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

But simple aesthetics only took me so far. Something strange was going on with my Nazi drag. I was a nihilist back then, and I definitely saw myself as a provocateur. But, where politics was concerned, I was as liberal as they came. The year was 2004; we were all too young for coded “alt-right” gestures.

And yet, somehow, the spell from Hitler’s day had, in fact, been cast over me, a half-German, half-Colombian boy from Elmhurst, Queens, who became a club kid and then a rockstar. I knew a lot of things that I’d conveniently managed to forget by the time I found the holster, family lore that had been imparted to me by my father when I was a child and remained hidden in a childish part of myself, even, or especially, when I got ready to perform in my stage-fascist regalia. Of course I hadn’t forgotten what my father had told me, I only stopped thinking about it, the way a lifelong thief knows exactly what they’re doing, but can’t bring themselves to connect their actions and their conscience.

The pieces of story that came to me of my father’s own childhood in Bavaria—a strange world full of Nazi salutes and panicked fleeing to bomb shelters—reached my ears while I sat on his lap, or while he held my hand on the street. I couldn’t help but compare the thought of my father as a boy throwing up his arm into the air in front of a swastika flag to my own experience holding my hand to my heart, pledging allegiance to Old Glory. His was an inverted benediction, from democracy to autocracy: He never commented on this inversion, this strange disconnect between our generations, and therefore the strangeness didn’t occur to me until much later in life.

He had his stories of growing up Nazi, of being primed for the Hitler Youth and the fateful intervention of Allied bombs upon all those would-be future Nazis. Once, during an air raid, the little boy

began crying and this unnerved his father, who quickly handled the problem by smacking him in front of the rest of the nervous neighborhood, who were all cowering in the bunker and were likely relieved and grateful to the man who’d just found a way to release the tension they all felt. The morning after, my father went out with his friends to collect shrapnel from the rubble.

I might’ve heard these stories while sitting on the seesaw or while my wrists felt the warm grip of my father’s palms, my body flying in figure-eights in the air around his legs. I wasn’t yet old enough during any of this to be confused by the sweet ring in his voice, colliding as it did with the sour content of the images they described. I only knew I was flying like a bird, like other pairs of wrists attached to children’s bodies enjoying the thrill of these bouts of parentally assisted flight, even as these parents are not German and not so old that they could have seen what my father saw.

My father had experienced a dramatic upheaval at an impressionable age. The liberating American, with his can-do GI goodness (another “blond beast,” yes, though one with a cleaner line back to the rational Enlightenment), replaced the National Socialist image of the healthy Aryan male, familiar from Riefenstahl films. And my father fell in love with them. It was the sight of an American soldier shaking his leg to a jazz tune over his transistor radio out in the street that seemed to awaken my father out of the Nazi spell (“I’d never once in my life seen a human body move like that”). I guess it’s not that surprising to be so taken in by the invader when your country has been reduced to a scrap heap.

“You have no idea what it’s like to wake up one day, still a child, and look around and see all around you that level of destruction,” my father once told me, “to have everything you thought was true all of sudden fall apart and watch foreigners reconstruct it all before your own eyes.” He’d just come back from his mother’s funeral in Munich, a woman I never met. It had been decades since he’d visited his homeland. The Germany of the mid-’90s must have made an impression on him: he was able to

experience what had happened to the land he grew up in, what the Marshall Plan had produced.

“Foreigners,” he said. I grew up as one of those foreigners, the Americans who’d come to liberate his country. But it was my father who I always saw as the foreigner, a Teuton married to a Latina, a man with a Kaiser Wilhelm mustache amid the feathered haircuts on the subway. And yet he saw himself as the quintessential American patriot. “I’m more American than Ronald Reagan,” a joke he loved to crack. He was full of contradictions—a Eurocentrist who wed a Colombian, a right-wing populist who read *The New York Times* cover to cover. He never could make a commitment to one side or another. His professed adoration notwithstanding, he never became an American citizen and remained content with his green card. Some invisible thing, a fishing line tethered him to the *Vaterland*, kept him from truly becoming the Yankee he desperately wanted to be.

My father kept something hidden in a closet in the apartment I grew up in, a shoebox full of trinkets and paraphernalia. It contained a cassette that he must have made—not too long before I was born—from an old phonograph record. Every now and then, he would put it into the tape machine, the classic, rectangular affair with the built-in speaker familiar from ’70s movies. After healthy swigs from the bottle, my father would press play and I’d hear something I never heard outside of the apartment, something sublime, though I hate to admit it. It was the captivating sound of 1,000 men singing in unison, with the stomp of 2,000 boots hitting the ground in time, singing a foreign language, one I heard often on TV spoken by villains, all while watching my father, who now turned into one of those villains as he marched throughout the apartment, stomping awkwardly around the dinner table. He tried to keep his steps in time with the soldiers while adhering to his beloved native tongue like a credulous little boy who couldn’t get close enough to the sweeping phalanx.

A kind of elasticity would take over his muscles, a product of the liberating bottle. I was gleeful during these

spells and I'd chase him around the table. When he saw me following him, he'd amplify his movements, almost goose-stepping, his cheeks rounding and his mouth widening. Which made me even happier.

Was this where my fascination with Nazi drag originated? Did it begin when I suspected that the kids in school might know about all this, when my bully started taunting me with accusations of Nazism because of my last name? When he found out about a pet name my father used for me, a delicate German nickname that translated poorly to English, he would yell it to me across the street—"Tsutsie!"—while Sieg Heiling. This was around the time that *Tootsie* came out, which seemed a cosmic affirmation: I was both a "sissy" and a Nazi! The S&M binary was already confirmed. My bully had, even at this early hour, put me in drag. But it also seemed like his predation was retributive, that somehow he knew what my father was doing to me with those tapes.

My father kept no tangible Nazi paraphernalia apart from the cassette. He balked at the swastika: It was a dead symbol, the American victory was decisive and, anyway he wanted nothing more than to be American. And yet, in our marching ritual around the dinner table, in his invocation of bodily movement and celebration, I was being imprinted with a secret initiatory rite from that very time, one that had taken possession of my father, as it once took possession of his father, and so many of his fellow ordinary Germans from 1922 until 1945. After his early childhood indoctrination, it persisted through him, undiminished or even strengthened by his wartime trauma, his later depression and alcoholism, and, yes, through his politics—and he had been unable to resist passing it down to me.

Was this why the old man wanted so much to put me in my place, to intimidate me, to scare me into submission, as soon as I literally outgrew him and let my hair hang to my shoulders? Was this why he made sure I heard the phrase "*der Führer*" spoken just a little too sweetly, why I started hearing talk of "Jewish propaganda," of "Stalin killed more," of "the genius of Goebbels"? The

invisible line to his homeland was tugging, reminding him of his childhood, inducing him to up the ante in the face of the threat of my puberty.

The "damn longhairs with their civil rights" was just his cover story. The real one had everything to do with the contest between two eligible males. It wasn't so much that now there was a disobedient hippie in need of discipline, as there was a new healthy body that was growing hair all over it. In Nazi Germany, this was seen as a glorious thing, with hopes for much javelin throwing in this body's future and a christening through experience on the battlefield. But I wasn't growing up in the blood and soil politics and culture my father grew up in: I was growing up in a liberalized world grappling with the full import of its democratic principles.

Scholars like Klaus Theweleit have documented how the Nazis depicted Jews and communists as effeminate sub-orders of humans corroding the healthy—and manly—body of Europa. It would take a homosocial fraternity, with its Germanic *Männerbund* of Teutonic war heroes, to meet the threat such feminized elements posed. The Nazi art that would later have such an effect on me buttressed this emphasis on neo-Hellenic vigor; symmetry and solidity register at the brain stem. It's an art for social Darwinists, for believers in (manly) "might makes right." I often questioned whether my father's panicked recriminations against a boy who too closely started resembling the dirty hippie bugaboo weren't first planted in that long ago time in the form of another type of *völkisch* outrage, that over "the dirty Jew."

I'd become politicized. Already as a teenager, I was waging political combat in a space that was supposed to be my own home. At a time when a frightened boy was in need of stewardship, my father became another frightened boy, a vindictive sibling from another generation and another world, riding in on the backs of some horrifying, blood-thirsty wolves.

His posture shifted, he somehow became taller. The angle made him seem monumental. I remember the show trials of my adolescence as though I were

in a German expressionist film, with my father bathed in a harsh spotlight that made him look broad-chested, more the square-jawed Mussolini than the littler Hitler. Through some psychic trick, he became a terrifying minister behind a lectern—distorted, stretched, elongated, like a figure on an art deco frieze.

It's the hallmark of the demagogue to make the charges opaque but the judgment clear. I never really knew what he wanted from me. I remember begging him through tears streaming down my face sitting across the dinner table to clear up the confusion, so we could come to an understanding, so he could stop the persecution. Yet, even at that terrible moment, I still could not tell what he wanted.

Though I knew full well what he didn't want. From time to time he'd get on his soapbox to denounce me in front of my mother and my brother and proclaim how the family (Germany) was a body and how that body was diseased (as Germany had been diseased), and how to save it from the disease was to eliminate the viruses that plagued it. My younger brother was referred to as an imperiled "innocent lamb" in imminent danger of becoming corrupted. My father would shame my mother for not agreeing with him, saying that the parents needed to "speak with one voice" in order to banish this problem and keep it from spreading. The invisible line back to the Nazi homeland was tugging wildly.

Something about my father's cruelty toward me felt pre-programmed and not under his control. Lingered scripts animated the old man's smears, traces perhaps from the disapproval my grandfather had directed at his own son decades earlier. "I come from peasant stock," my father liked to say, and there was always a mixture of pride and shame in the testimony. Indeed, Opa Dengler was a "man's man," "Nazi classic," in fact. He died before I was born and I never even saw a picture of him, but I imagine him from my father's telling as coming close to the streetwise and thuggish SA, with their beer hall brawls. It was never easy getting facts about this mysterious figure who surfaced only when my father wanted to cull sympathy for how he was

treated. “He was a truck driver,” he’d like to say whenever as a boy I would ask him for information, “he liked to come home drunk and beat my mother and he often smacked me around, as well.” It must have been hard for my father.

Opa Dengler was, in fact, a Nazi, in the official sense. Once the Nazis took power, while my father’s family lived in the small Bavarian town of Plattling, Opa became a chauffeur for high-ranking NSDAP officials, the personal driver for a handful of them all over the country. Legend had it as I was growing up that Opa had even driven “*der Führer*” himself on several occasions. I imagine he had to have enrolled in the party in order to keep this cushy gig, which gave him a high degree of prestige. He must’ve looked gigantic to my father, an only child, overprotected by his mother, a woman who noticed the young boy’s intellect and encouraged him to read instead of driving cars like his dad.

Oma’s influence set my father down the path toward self-education: He has a natural intellect, he’s gifted with analytical smarts, as Oma herself was. I didn’t grow up around books, my parents weren’t the biggest readers. Still, I give my father credit for my own autodidactic streak. The Nazis hated folks like my father, the nerdy, quiet types. They preferred the hypermasculinized ideal which my truck driving grandfather epitomized, something my father could never achieve.

Oma Dengler must’ve loved seeing her husband in his uniform. Perhaps my father did, too. How compelling such deliberately crafted spectacles must have seemed to such a young boy. Soon, they would never see it again: Opa buried his uniform when he learned of the Allied advances.

In any case, my father was too complicated to follow in Opa’s footsteps. He wasn’t made for the manly, Nazi working class. He was better cut out for liberalism and education. He’d hoped he could find those things in America, away from the rubble and his parents. But he didn’t find them.

Maybe the invisible line that was tugging at him all those years was reminding him not only of the failed state of the *Deutsches Reich*, which he’d been

“No matter how much I wished to coat my choices with postmodern performative gloss, the grandson of an actual Nazi was dressing like a Nazi.”

mysteriously instructed to uphold, but the underlying reality that, at least according to the insane standards of all of those “particles of Hitler” that had coalesced into the National Socialist death machine, he too was a failed state.

Had I been trying to compensate for my father’s perceived failures at masculinity? Was my Nazi drag the result of an unconscious alliance with my Nazi grandfather, a puerile gambit at fixing the “feminization” in my lineage? These were the questions that would have to wait for my awakening, a moment I experienced in my father’s presence. I had showed him the picture of me in the *NME*, with the headline. It must’ve seemed like bragging to him, or a violation of our family code that kept acknowledgement of the Nazi past strictly in house. Look at what they’re saying about me! About us?

He was speechless, less—I think—from shock than from puzzlement. Maybe nerves, too, seeing how I was giving away a shameful family secret. It could have also been guilt. I know that he feels pain about his failings as a father. Maybe he was dismayed to the point of recognition. I won’t ever know. Though our relationship has improved dramatically over the years, the bar has always been set pretty low, so, at the end

of the day, we don’t talk very much or very deeply.

I first began to notice an inkling of the truth during that quiet hesitation with my father, that it was in fact no coincidence that my moonlighting as an artsy brownshirt came on the heels of my grandfather’s stint as somewhat the genuine article.

No matter how much I wished to coat my choices with postmodern performative gloss, the grandson of an actual Nazi was dressing like a Nazi. I had, through some mysterious logic, disinterred the uniform my grandfather had buried and “performed” it in front of a public itself eager for this type of resurrection of Nazi spectacle. This was no punk-situationist prank. It was a leakage of history into the present, a blob moving through time, seeping into my synapses, animating my creative process with an unseen push from long before. Maybe then I finally felt how conspicuous this decision had in fact always felt to me, how it had been living there just under the skin of my awareness. No matter how cool it had felt to me to play the villain, a blithe assumption of the innocence of aesthetics, of “art for art’s sake,” was beginning its long implosive course.

Those disgraced symbols fit a little too snugly. I could not lay claim to the punk rocker’s prerogative. Being famous could not insulate me, either. This play-acting was a proxy, a placeholder made all the more effective by the attention it received as it stood in for the original of a boy chasing his father round a dinner table while the recorded sounds of actual Nazis marching and singing played in the background. The grotesquerie of that image is hard to bear, even now as I write. I see my art infiltrated, a violation of its sacred precincts. Here was the limit to provocation. Being a rockstar couldn’t save me anymore, couldn’t absolve me from owning up to this horrible lineage.

But Nazi cosplay wasn’t just my shame: It was also my redemption. I was guided to sidle up to the horrible so that I could better understand the horrible that lurked in our family’s collective unconscious. The artist can be an autocrat, hellbent on ultimate control. And though the S&M binary

implied in my Nazi cosplay was my most efficient means of achieving total control of the artistic product, in its unconscious reenactment of the biopolitics of my father's abuse, it also tried to achieve total control over the suffering I'd experienced.

The sexualized Nazi, familiar from films like Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, was the carapace behind which I could enact these scripts of suffering, the seesaw between the sadistic and the masochistic that makes BDSM so thrilling, a thrill which the Nazis themselves, with their elevation of pubescence as the terminus of masculine development, would have understood well. The script of S&M, in compressing sexuality to a coarse binary, is a natural fit for the coarse Nazi.

My father had taught me how to reenact, how to put up a play. In equating the family to an organism and, by implication, my own body as a virus plaguing that organism, my father was enacting these very scripts of total control, the surveillance and exploitation of the human biome inlaid in the National Socialist project, which had been enacted all around him growing up in Nazi Germany. And in my artistry I too always sought to play and also to *put up* a play.

I had to mock up my inner world in Nazi drag so that one day I might tell the deeper story for which I hadn't yet any words. It was only through playacting the sadist that I could hope to one day listen to the dreams of the masochist, my inner sufferer, whose misery at the hands of the original sadist, my father, was cloaked in silence, but whose story I could now finally begin to tell.

The words for these events would escape me for a while longer. I spent the better part of an adult life throwing objects and making loud noises, silently believing that I was such a noxious, infectious presence that no one close to me could trust me. It always seemed my rage was too white hot for my vocal cords, that they'd singe under the extreme heat. I could never speak of what he'd done, of what had been shown to me, not because I had hidden the events from consciousness, but because it felt as though my body would break in two

if I tried to express the horror and helplessness of his psychological crimes against himself and against his son. The holster was the first silent beat of the ensuing script. Now Act 2 has put text into the speech bubbles.

It's easy to imagine stories about the brilliance of style decisions becoming stories that condemn those same decisions on purported moral grounds, seemingly from one year to the next. Nonetheless, I still insist on the promise of drag. I believe that the elevation of an aesthetic to the level of camp can neutralize its original sincerity, its original content. This type of recontextualization, of course, is not specific to drag as an art form. It was exactly what the punks were after in their own use of fascist signifiers and other taboos. If it's true that such neutralization occurs, I can take solace in knowing that somewhere behind my conscious intentions in the moment, my redeployment of Nazi regalia as a form of drag was, in its own mute way, a disavowal of the disturbing family legacy from Germany. I was using camp as a kind of hot lamp, bringing light and burning away residues, cauterizing wounds that had been left open.

At the end of a long tour I left the holster in the lounge of the tour bus by accident. It might've made it all the way to the depot where maybe it sat until the next band rented the bus and went on the road. In all likelihood, the driver, cleaning up the vehicle for the next tour, tossed it or kept it. I used to regret not being more organized—not making sure to have had the forethought to hold on to this artifact from a different time. Who knows, maybe one day they'd put it in a rock music museum of some sort? Or I would have it today and would keep it stashed safely in some shoebox in the closet. I would go to it now and then, as I would a photo album from high school days, and reminisce with friends and family about the way things used to be. Maybe I'd show it to my kids.

But it's been a long time since I've had that thought. ■

This article was originally published on June 5, 2023.



Album of the Week

Sparks, *The Girl Is Crying in Her Latte*

If music can be broken into four different quadrants—with one axis running from serious to light-hearted and another from boring to interesting—then The 1975 would be in one corner (serious and boring) while Sparks would be in the polar opposite corner. The pair of brothers behind the band, Ron and Russell Mael, grew up in a very self-serious time and place for music: Southern California in the 1960s. Some call it the golden era of folk, but not the Maels.

"We detested folk music because it was cerebral and sedate and we had no time for that," Ron told *The Guardian* in 2002. They were drawn to the more bombastic, and presumably more fun, music that was being made in England. Their impatience led to a fascinating career too lengthy to discuss here. Their latest album, *The Girl Is Crying in Her Latte*, would be a good place to start.

Yes, it is their 26th album, not counting their collaborative album made with Franz Ferdinand, *FFS*. But here Sparks is offering the same wry humor, anxious panic, and infectious groove that made *FFS* so memorable.

The brothers find a beat and they stick with it, creating something that feels like krautrock, sarcasm, and a dance party. Putting on a Sparks album feels like entering a world with slightly different rules.

—David Meir Grossman

The Last Holdouts of American Meritocracy

The campaign against New York's exam for specialized schools punishes the children of working-class immigrants in the name of racial equity

BY SHELUYANG PENG

In late October 2012, as Hurricane Sandy was set to crash upon the shores of New York City, I remember standing in front of a newsstand in my neighborhood of Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and scanning the headlines. A Chinese-language newspaper, the *Sing Tao Daily*, displayed a large photo of the white vortex on the front page. Below that was a banner: “SHSAT Postponed To November 18.”

What exactly is the SHSAT—something so important to Chinese-language New Yorkers that its postponement received top billing alongside one of the biggest natural disasters to ever strike the city? The Specialized High School Admissions Test (commonly abbreviated as the SHSAT) is the sole gatekeeper of admission into New York City’s specialized public high schools, some of the most prestigious public schools in the entire country. It is also a central battleground in a conflict over what kind of country America should be.

In working-class Sunset Park, where half the population is foreign-born and much of the other half is made up of the children of the foreign-born, tutoring centers are ubiquitous in the Asian-populated cross section. An array of acronyms fill the front windows of each tutoring center: SHSAT, PSAT, SAT, ACT, AP. While some immigrants may not have a full grasp of the English language, they can still understand that these acronyms serve as symbols of upward mobility—and of a meritocracy where access to elite spaces is not about knowing the right people and signaling the right cultural cues, but about

competency on an exam that anyone can pass with enough studying. That’s what drew Jewish immigrants in droves to specialized high schools decades ago. And in an era where elite colleges consistently rank Asian applicants lower in “personality” metrics—a loophole that allows them to impose quotas and cap the number of incoming Asian students in the name of increasing “diversity”—it’s no wonder why many Asian immigrants are working to preserve standardized testing.

The children of Asian immigrants, like myself and the current and former students who spoke with me for this article, still tend to see the test as a good thing. For us, a colorblind, meritocratic admissions system is not only perfectly consistent with liberal ideals, but also serves as a crucial engine of economic mobility.

On the other side of the debate, the fight to eliminate the SHSAT is led by a cohort of identity rights activists, wealthy progressives, and other members of the professional-managerial class who depict the test as an oppressive tool of racial segregation. These people are represented by leading figures in the liberal educational establishment and by institutions like *The New York Times*, which published an article last week decrying the “lack of diversity” in city schools, while also noting that Asian students were offered 53% of all seats in the specialized high schools this year. The *Times* article also describes the restoration of “tougher criteria” at specialized high schools as a move that is “worrying integration advocates.” In other words, the article

and its supporters argue that people who support rigorous academic standards that are applied without regard for race or ethnicity are segregationists. And indeed, that is exactly how it was characterized by *The New Yorker*’s Philip Gourevitch, who responded to the revelation about a testing system in which Asians dramatically outperform whites and every other group by tweeting about “segregationist admission statistics,” which he labeled “an ongoing disgrace.”

The case for racial equity in New York’s schools was made most explicitly by former Department of Education Chancellor Richard Carranza who, in arguing against the SHSAT in 2018, remarked that “I just don’t buy into the narrative that any one ethnic group owns admission to these schools.” His statement set off a wave of grassroots protests from Asian American parents, who knew exactly which “ethnic group” he was talking about.

Despite Carranza’s suggestion that a single homogenous group was unfairly monopolizing the top schools, the reality looks very different. During the four years I attended Stuyvesant, the most selective of all the specialized high schools, I witnessed a dazzling variety of ethnicities, cultures, and religions. Students wearing kippahs commingled with students clad in hijabs. Students from the West Indies socialized with students from India. Students from various East Asian backgrounds coagulated around similar interests: bubble tea, Korean pop music. No Stuyvesant student would ever claim that “one ethnic group” dominated the school.

The common thread that linked students of all stripes was the immigrant experience. During a social studies class one day, the teacher asked us to raise our hands if we had at least one grandparent born outside the U.S. Every single hand shot up. The teacher then dramatically shrunk the question’s scope to only apply to students with two foreign-born parents. Even then, only a few hands came down. Some students were immigrants themselves, coming with their family to America before high school and still managing to secure admission into the halls of upward mobility.

What is most notable about the schools, and yet goes largely ignored in the anti-SHSAT racial equity discourse, is that the immigrant dynamic operates separately from race. When *The New York Times* published a profile in 2012 of a Black student at Stuyvesant, titled “To Be Black at Stuyvesant High,” the student profiled was a Jamaican immigrant. The piece mentioned the former president of Stuyvesant’s Black Students Association, who is also Jamaican. The *Times* seemingly never gets tired of this subject, and ran another profile of Black Stuyvesant students seven years later. In that piece, every student profiled either had one non-Black parent or was from a Nigerian, Eritrean, or Kenyan immigrant family.

While New York’s top public schools are still full of the children of immigrant strivers, many among the city’s white liberal elites—America’s white saviors, as Zach Goldberg dubbed them—prefer sending their children to private schools that cost tens of thousands of dollars a year in tuition. These same private-school parents partake in cost-free virtue signaling by demanding that the SHSAT be eliminated to ensure more “diversity.” In fact, *The New York Times* seems to have made it a mission to guilt these parents into supporting the equity agenda. In 2020, the paper put out a podcast called Nice White Parents, then followed that up with a piece about “How White Progressives Undermine School Integration.” The podcast and article fail to consider the roles Asian American parents have played in the education debate. Indeed the only mention of Asians is a throwaway line where one panelist declares that both “white and Asian families” were complicit in opposing “integration,” and later mentions “white and privileged parents”—a rhetorical sleight-of-hand that casts Asians as oppressors of people of color, despite the fact that Asians *are* people of color.

But while the test-based system is presented as racist and backward, the evidence shows the opposite. Not only does it favor students from Asian backgrounds, it does so despite their relative lack of resources. Half the students at specialized high schools currently

qualify for subsidized lunches. In contrast to media portrayals of “crazy rich Asians,” Asian Americans are the poorest racial group in New York City.

One example of such a story is Tenzin (first name withheld for privacy reasons), a rising senior at Bronx Science who was voted vice president of her school’s National Honor Society. Her grandparents were Tibetan separatists who followed the Dalai Lama into exile in India after the unsuccessful 1959 Tibetan uprising, where her parents were born. They then immigrated to the Woodside neighborhood of Queens, where the largest concentration of Tibetans in America reside. Her parents still prepare Indian dishes at home.

Like many other students at specialized high schools, Tenzin comes from a working-class family. Her mother is a hotel housekeeper and her father drives a taxi. Though her parents were not well educated themselves, they raised their children to value hard work and academic success.

As a rising senior, Tenzin expressed anxiety over her college prospects. She has heard horror stories from other Bronx Science students about Asian applicants with stellar academic records being rejected from schools that they thought were on their level. This scenario is playing out in high schools and at kitchen tables across America—a “growing consensus among Asian American families and their teen-age children,” Jay Caspian Kang recently wrote in *The New Yorker*, “that these colleges do not want them on their campuses, regardless of their accomplishments.”

Despite the increasing difficulty, Asian Americans are still finding success in the city’s specialized high schools—and many graduates remind us of the value of these schools for immigrants and their children. Tahseen Chowdhury is one such person, successfully navigating the treacherous terrain of identity and achievement in 21st-century America.

Chowdhury grew up in Queens, the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world. His family lived in a tiny apartment in the Bengali enclave of East Elmhurst where the steady roar of planes from nearby LaGuardia Airport

symbolized the willingness of many to pack everything up and travel halfway across the world. Growing up, his father was a deli worker making sandwiches for minimum wage, while his mother delivered newspapers. His parents did not have the chance to climb the ladder of upward mobility themselves, but they wanted that chance for their children.

A central pillar of NYC’s Bengali communities is the presence of Khan’s Tutorial centers. Founded in 1994 by the late Dr. Mansur Khan, Khan’s Tutorial has rapidly grown to 10 locations around the New York area. Chowdhury showed me a heuristic for finding Bengali Americans: putting *Khan’s Tutorial* into Google Maps shows all the Bengali enclaves nearby.

Khan’s Tutorial informs Bengali immigrants about the SHSAT and its role as an economic mover for the children of poor immigrants. Chowdhury’s parents could not afford to pay for test prep out-of-pocket, so they delayed buying a home and put his tuition on a credit card. The sacrifice paid off when their son got into Stuyvesant.

After graduating from Stuyvesant in 2018, Chowdhury attended Macaulay Honors College, an extremely selective honors program created by the City University of New York (CUNY) to attract low-income but high-achieving students. Chowdhury is now a consultant at Accenture, where he works with state and local governments managing their health care systems. His father still works in the same deli, while his mother is now a health aide. One day he will make enough money to pay back their sacrifice many times over.

It is not clear if these schools will continue to incubate and champion the city’s immigrants. The Stuyvesant alumni and sociology professors Syed Ali and Margaret M. Chin have studied the stories of people like Tenzin and Chowdhury in depth. In 2018, they wrote about how the specialized SHSAT-based schools lift families out of poverty.

In the United States, if a child’s parents are poor, he or she is generally likely to grow up to be poor, or a little less so. But, as we’ve found in our research among Stuyvesant

graduates, New York's specialized schools obliterate that correlation ... Nearly all of these kids went to college, often selective ones, and most went on to do well professionally. The poorer students became middle- or upper-middle class, and the middle-class students often did better than their parents.

As the Supreme Court is set to strike down race-based affirmative action in *SFFA v. Harvard*, standardized testing will once again be thrust into mainstream discourse. In recent years, over 80% of American colleges—including every Ivy League college—have dropped standardized testing requirements, which Asians tend to score the highest on. The same is happening in law schools. As colleges attempt to find new ways to close the gates on qualified

Asians, they will increasingly rely on “holistic” approaches designed to circumvent the court's decision.

While challenges to NYC's elite admissions system have been successfully repelled (for now), other school districts have not been so lucky. In late 2020, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a public school outside of Washington, D.C., that U.S. News ranked the top high school in America, replaced its admissions exam with an essay. The Asian population plummeted from 73% to 54%—and a federal appellate court ruled that there was no evidence of discrimination, despite the fact that only the Asian population went down. As is the case with Jewish “overrepresentation,” Asian success is now viewed as a problem to be solved rather than a celebration of American progress.

Similar test-banning efforts are happening across the country in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Boston's and San Francisco's top public high schools have already adopted zoning and lottery-based admissions standards. New York City has been the last holdout in the war against American meritocracy. As the Supreme Court is set to push education to the forefront of America's culture wars, and as the DEI regime continues its long march through America's institutions, the need to preserve standardized testing—the bias-free measures of merit that allowed so many children of working-class immigrants past and present the chance for upward mobility—is more important than ever. ■

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HISTORY

Rebbetzin Bruria Hutner David, 1938–2023

A former student remembers the blazing intellect who revolutionized Haredi women's education

BY RIVKA PRESS SCHWARTZ

If people know of Rebbetzin Bruria Hutner David, who passed away in Jerusalem on April 9, but did not know her, they probably know two things about her: that she played an important role in the production of her father, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner's, masterwork, *Pachad Yitzchak*, and that she earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Both of these facts of her biography have been retold often, frequently by those who imagine

that they are relaying the frisson of a gotcha or perhaps conveying a note of hidden feminism: The scion of rabbinic royalty, born in New York City in 1938, was a learned woman in ways both secular and religious, which she did not trumpet or demand credit for. But as a way of praising her or summarizing her life's accomplishments, it fails, for it defines her on others' terms. Others, often men, may have been impressed primarily by her contribution to her father's Torah work, or her academic doctorate.

But that was likely because they either did not know of, or did not respect, the bold undertaking in Haredi women's education that was her life's work.

That work was a project that, when described, sounds audacious, if not fanciful. From one institution based in the Matersdorf neighborhood of Jerusalem, she hoped to rearrange the mental furniture of Haredi women chosen for their academic ability and their willingness to have their mental furniture rearranged. Thus equipped, these women would go on to be the teachers and rebbetzins and mentors and mothers who would reshape American Haredi Jewry to become more formal, more dignified, more aware of the uniqueness and incomparable worth of Torah (as well as more proud of its distinctiveness), less acculturated, and less, well, American.

To look back after 50 years of the institution's life is to see, remarkably, how much of her vision she realized.

The institution was Beth Jacob of Jerusalem—BJJ, as it was known to everyone but Rebbetzin David, or “the Machon,” as she insisted on calling it. It began as an arm for foreign-born students of a large and venerable Jerusalem Bais Yaakov school, and in its later years became

a free-standing institution for students from outside Israel. When I attended in 1994-95, we were American (mostly), Canadian, Australian, British, French, Swiss, Belgian, and South African.

The admissions process was frankly elitist. In her institution's heyday, Rebbetzin David skimmed the intellectual cream off of the top of every non-Hasidic Bais Yaakov high school class. In later years, as the "seminary" (Israel gap year for women) experience became extremely widespread, and many institutions opened to meet the demand, there were other schools geared toward intellectually gifted and academically inclined women, some of which offered more engaging modes of instruction or younger and more vibrant educators. While she was brilliant, rigorously intellectual, and a demanding teacher, Rebbetzin David's goal was not primarily to teach material or sharpen skills. She was out to inculcate a worldview. If ever the German word *Weltanschauung*, overused in a certain sector of the modern Orthodox world, was apposite, it is here.

Someone asked me if there was a website where they could read Rebbetzin David's Torah thoughts. Every word of the question indicates how profoundly the questioner did not know Rebbetzin David or her ethos. She never taught or wrote for any audience other than her own students. She did not lecture publicly; she addressed current students and alumnae. To frame this as "*tzniut*," perhaps the most highly praised virtue for a Haredi woman, seems to me to miss the mark. I reached for, and then set aside, the obvious metaphor of casting pearls before swine, since Rebbetzin David would have recoiled at its coarseness and its non-Jewishness, but she was not about to lay out her ideas to audiences unprepared to appreciate and absorb them. She was not offering drive-by entertainment or one-off inspiration. (This aversion to providing entertainment was manifest in BJJ's classes, as well, most of which were conducted as dry frontal lectures.) She was imparting and reinforcing a worldview, and she would and could do so only to those who had already shown a willingness to listen. Nor would she have taken credit for even a scintilla of novelty in her approach—she saw herself as

transmitting an authentic worldview, as expressed in a wide range of Torah sources and crystallized in the teaching of "the Rosh Yeshiva," as she always referred to her father.

In a conversation after her passing, I was asked, "was one school year enough to achieve that? September to June?" The answer is both yes and not really. That year was a beginning, a challenge, a shift, which some students resisted, some students sidestepped, and some ignored. But for the ones who embraced her example, her teaching carved an indelible groove, one that could be reinforced—through alumnae *shiurim*, letters and conversations, newsletters and visits—over the years and decades.

Rebbetzin David's worldview emphasized the primacy of Torah—not in the reductive way of "you should marry a man in *kollel*," but in the underlying philosophical way that means that whatever field of study or profession her students pursued, it would be with a deep understanding of the way that the Torah's wisdom is incomparable to the wisdom of any discipline or academic endeavor. Whether that teaching ended up shaping her students' or their husbands' life choices, it would shape how they spoke, how they thought, whom they admired, and which accomplishments they most highly praised. (That question—whom do you admire? What do you praise?—was a characteristic one, and one she returned to often. "*Ish lefi mehallelo*.")

The deep sense of the fundamental soul-difference between Jews and non-Jews that she sought to instill may not sit well with everyone reading this, but it was a core element of her teaching. She taught this sense of difference in ways halachic, philosophical, and cultural. We were meant to understand our distinctiveness, our apartness even from the most refined and ethical non-Jews. She wanted us to feel less identified in every way with the surrounding world, and she praised to her American students the European students who felt less emotionally connected to the countries of their birth and citizenship.

Rebbetzin David sought to have us live and move through the world with a dignity and weightiness born of our essential importance as human beings and as Jews.

She abhorred silliness and meaninglessness. Relaxation, or regeneration, certainly. But being silly? Life was meant to be lived with seriousness of purpose.

Her teaching was buttressed by a stream of supports and examples that ranged widely: citations from a broad array of Torah sources, as well as citations from contemporary newspapers and books and instances from prevailing culture. She kept abreast of American newspapers and was well-read in contemporary academic literature in both Israel and the United States.

While she admired, enjoyed, and was drawn to raw processing power, intellect was not ultimately granted for its own sake, or to enable parlor tricks. Above all, she cited a dictum that began as a narrow halachic statement about the placement of the *Ata chonantanu* prayer in *maariv* on Saturday night but that she took as a mission statement for life: "*Im ein da'at, havdala minayin?*" "Without discerning intellect, how can one make distinctions?" Those distinctions—between the holy and the mundane, between different gradations of holiness or importance—were characteristic of everything about her teaching and her ethos.

Ultimately, her project was to ensure that her students imbibed and propagated certain values—that they held a worldview not by osmosis or knee-jerk cultural reflex, but by deep understanding of the underlying values it encoded. Whether those values were holding oneself apart from the surrounding culture, or a rejection of starry-eyed enthrallment with the Zionist state, she wanted us to do that not merely because it was what our community did, but because we understood that it was a reflection of a Torah approach to life.

Her teaching was what we knew of her. She was not otherwise emotionally open or available to her students; she did not invite us into her private life (metaphorically) or, generally, her home (literally). She retained her father's apartment down the street from the BJJ dorm and it was there, rather than in the home she lived in with her husband in the Har Nof neighborhood, that she held smaller and more intimate gatherings of students. Certainly, she never shared personal tales of her family life or her interior emotional life.

In the hands of her detractors, and those who did not know her, it was easy to tell a story that turned her intellectual brilliance and emotional reserve into a cautionary tale. That she never had children contributed to a narrative that sounded like nothing so much as 19th-century warnings that excessive intellectual exertions by women would divert blood flow from their uteruses to their brains. Those of us who knew her in any capacity knew her to be a woman of passionate emotion, powerfully expressed. She loved her students, and reveled in Torah learning, and expressed strong and fiery feelings about matters of importance to her. (She did not, as no one reading this will be surprised to learn, suffer fools lightly.)

And me? I'm a modern Orthodox feminist—and one of the ones, ironically, who was deeply shaped and influenced by my interactions with Rebbetzin David, even if not all of her lessons quite took. She encouraged me to engage less seriously in the secular academic world, concerned about how I might be drawn to it if fully immersed in it. I immersed myself and was drawn, pursued an academic Ph.D.,

and came to think differently than she did about many things. I still value the many lessons I learned from her, and the ways in which continuing to learn from her was a challenge to my worldview, even as I did not abandon it to reembrace hers.

My last substantive conversation with her was one in which I tried to explain how my worldview differed from hers—how I saw the relationship between secular knowledge and Torah differently than she did. Fascinatingly, her response was not to criticize me, but to attempt to convince me that our views were not so different, after all. I see that, now, as an expression of love. She was a brilliant woman, and entirely capable of understanding what I was saying. But she was trying to convince—me? herself?—that we were not so far apart. I think much more now about her emotional life—the years of guiding students through dilemmas of child-rearing and education when she never had any children of her own; of investing her soul-energy in students who, much as we loved her, could never feel toward her as she felt toward us (as students never can toward

teachers, nor children to parents.) I think about how relatively young she was when she taught me. I saw her as being as old as the hills, but she was in her mid-50s, only a decade older than I am now.

Rebbetzin David was a blazing intellect, who inspired her students with her rigor and range even as she discouraged us from pursuing the credentials she amassed. She was deeply private and reserved, and she loved her students, and we loved her. She inculcated in her students a deeply traditional worldview, even as in some ways she lived her life outside of the narrowest lines of her community. She was a woman of great complexity, living out her values with thoughtfulness and intention. She had no children, yet she left thousands of students shaped by her teaching and determined to pass it on. It is easy, and incorrect, to see her as a woman of contradictions, even hypocrisy. She was, instead, a woman who lived what she taught: that the work of a great intellect is to make careful distinctions. ■

This article was originally published on June 1, 2023.

COMMUNITY

The Road to Knighthood

For her efforts in helping Jews regain their Spanish citizenship, Doreen Alhadeff was honored—in Queen Isabella's name

BY DAVID VOLK

A funny thing happened to Doreen Alhadeff on the way to getting her Spanish citizenship. What started out as an effort to regain something Spain had taken from her family five centuries ago ended up with her being knighted into an order named after

Queen Isabella, who exiled her family in the first place.

Alhadeff has loved Spain ever since she spent two years as a student in the country in 1969. The only thing missing for the then-19-year-old resident was the Jewish culture she grew up with back in Seattle, which has the third-largest Sephardic population in

the U.S. Although almost 500 years had passed since the expulsion, she told me, “the knowledge of [Spain's] Sephardic heritage at that time was not at all present. People weren't aware of it at all.”

Still, Alhadeff—whose family traces its history back to Spain via Italy and Turkey, and came to Seattle in 1906—was drawn to the country; “I have always felt a strong affinity to Spain,” she said. She returned frequently over the years while also increasing her involvement in Sephardic organizations back home. She helped organizers in Madrid

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hold Erensyra, an international Sephardic heritage conference, and then persuaded the organization to hold a conference in Seattle. She co-founded the Seattle Sephardic Network, which helps people find cultural resources in the Pacific Northwest, and she was named ambassador to Red Juderias of Spain, which supports and publicizes a group of cities in Spain with Sephardic heritage.

She was in Madrid in May 2015 when Parliament was considering the repatriation law—allowing people who could document their Spanish heritage to regain their citizenship—and stayed up late in Seattle to hear the results of the final vote a month later. After it passed, she jumped at the chance.

“It was something that had been taken away from family and ancestors of mine,” she said, “and, given the opportunity, it was something I wanted to take back.”

It wasn't easy. Applicants had a two-year window (which was later extended by a year) to provide proof of ancestral ties to Spain, get certification of claims recognized by a Jewish community organization in Seattle, translate the papers into Spanish, and get them notarized—in Spain. In less than a year, Alhadeff became the first American to gain citizenship under the law.

Alhadeff quickly realized her work wasn't done, however. “I knew what it meant to me,” she said. “I felt like I was this one person at the time who could help people get through the process.”

She fielded questions from people all over the world, including Jennifer McCullum—who was new to Seattle, got a late start on the application process, and didn't know where to turn until she was referred to Alhadeff. The encouragement proved extremely helpful, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic ground the process to a halt.

“At every step—whether it was pointing me in the right direction, commiserating with me over three years without a word, text messages saying, ‘Have you heard anything?’—her encouragement and faith in me meant everything,” McCullum said. It also helped her weather the storm when her application was initially rejected.

“For many of those over 65, the language that they knew, that they grew up with wasn't current-day Spanish. It was Ladino.”

McCullum was devastated. “It feels like the wound is still fresh,” she recalled. “It's the closest I have come in this process to feel what my ancestors must have felt in being told you are no longer welcome in a place that is your home, in a place you know is your birthright.”

McCullum had to sue the Spanish government to reconsider before she was finally approved.

At the same time she was busy helping applicants, Alhadeff also helped lobby the Spanish government to make applying easier by modifying the required cultural test and language test—both written in modern Spanish, which is much different from the Ladino that many Sephardic Jews, including Alhadeff, speak. “There were a few of us that said nobody's going to go learn a second language at this point, and for many of those over 65, the language that they knew, that they grew up with wasn't current-day Spanish. It was Ladino,” she recalled. “So, it was a little bit of a problem.”

As a result of the lobbying effort, the government exempted children under 18 and adults over 70 years old from the testing requirement. So, Alhadeff also applied for and received citizenship for her grandchildren.

Luis Fernando Esteban Bernaldez, the honorary consul for Spain in

Washington and Oregon says he believes that Alhadeff helped more than 100 people gain their Spanish citizenship, which is why he nominated her for the knighthood in honor of her “demonstrated loyalty in furthering Spain's relationship with the Americas.”

Esteban said he believes that Alhadeff—who was officially knighted at a ceremony in Bellevue, Washington, on Oct. 17, 2022, when she was given a medal on a ribbon and a pin—may be the first Jewish woman to receive the honor from the Order of Queen Isabella the Catholic.

Alhadeff isn't necessarily a big fan of Queen Isabella and the Alhambra Decree, which forced the country's Jews into exile in the late 1400s, but she is excited about what becoming the first female Sephardic Jew to receive the honor symbolizes. “I just think it shows unbelievable change,” she said. “With people working at it and wanting it, that change can come about. I think that's huge.”

She's already seen some of that change in the years since she began visiting Spain.

“I see the difference from when I was there [first] because there was no awareness of the heritage or the Sephardic history. It wasn't discussed. It wasn't taught. Now organizations are speaking out about Sephardic heritage, restoring Sephardic sites as well as teaching it in school,” she said. “That's been quite a journey for me, but it's also been quite a journey for Spain.” ■

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The Pizza I Couldn't Leave Behind When I Converted to Judaism

Tweaking my great-grandfather's recipe allowed me to create a Jewish identity that honors my Italian heritage

BY KAT ROMANOW

I grew up in the Montreal neighborhood of Petite-Patrie, where my parents and I shared a duplex—one of those quintessential Montreal buildings—with my maternal grandparents. Our home was one of the six that my great-grandfather Donato Monaco built for his children on this street, and it sat side-by-side with the bakery he and his brothers Vincenzo and Antonio opened in 1932, in a part of town where many Italian immigrants settled in the early 1900s.

The bakery was called Corona, meaning “crown” in Italian. They sold pizza, bread, and taralli to members of the local Italian community, and delivered their products around the city by horse and buggy. It was a small business, with family members pitching in to help run it.

The bakery was at the center of my family's life for many years. I was told stories about the weekly Sunday lunches of pasta that my family hosted in their home above the bakery once they had closed for the day, and the time my great-grandfather was unjustly interned for six months during WWII and running the bakery fell to my grandmother and her then-future husband. My grandmother served customers and my grandfather baked pizza and bread in the large wood-fired ovens that were located behind the storefront. The bakery holds memories, both dear and difficult, that have become part of who I am.

I grew up seeing my great-aunts and

uncles on a daily basis, and because we lived so close to one another, we often crossed the street into each other's homes for impromptu dinners, birthday parties, holiday celebrations, and many other gatherings. Accompanied by my mom, I would often duck behind the bakery counter to see my grandfather, a place few got to see, with its wooden floors always covered in a fine layer of flour. It was a unique upbringing that gave me a taste of times when families lived in close proximity to one another rather than being spread across cities or countries.

Living so close to the bakery also meant we were never without a loaf of bread or slab of pizza; these things were ever present in my kitchen growing up, as well as at family get-togethers. This included the long zoulou bread with its rounded ends and raised lip down its center, small paninis for sandwiches, and rosemary and oil pizza. But without a doubt, the pizza Napoletana was the family favorite. This was a rectangular pizza made with a yeasted dough that was enriched with lard and topped with a mixture of crushed tomatoes, finely chopped parsley, and finely grated parmesan cheese. It was baked in an oiled sheet pan at very high heat, so that the bottom was golden brown, and there were blistered spots on top of the pizza and crispy corners.

One of my fondest memories of this pizza was getting to eat it for breakfast on Christmas mornings when I was a young girl. I would wake up more

excited to eat than I was to open the gifts that “Santa” had left me; I knew this was the one day a year when I had something more exciting ahead of me than cereal or eggs. Sitting at my parents' round wooden kitchen table, while it was still dark outside, eating warm pizza Napoletana was pure happiness and contentment for me.

The bakery closed its doors in 1995 when there was no one in the family to continue running it, and the pizza recipe wasn't written down. We went to other bakeries to buy similar pizzas, hoping to find one that tasted like what we remembered from the bakery, but nothing tasted quite as good.

I've always loved eating, but my interest in cooking and food history is something I developed in my 20s, at the same time that I decided I wanted to convert from Roman Catholicism to Judaism. My interest in studying Jewish food academically is what led me to realize that I felt at home in the Jewish community.

As I moved forward with my conversion, I also trained as a Jewish food historian, completing an M.A., and co-founding The Wandering Chew as a way to share all that I had learned about Jewish food and culture with people. It was in the lead-up to hosting an Italian Jewish dinner that I decided I wanted to add my own Italian Jewish story to the menu. I wanted to recreate the pizza Napoletana I had grown up eating, and bring it forward with me as a representation of my new identity, without



HOLIDAYS



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HISTORY

Tablet explores the past at [tabletmag.com/sections/history](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history)

Pizza Napoletana

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INGREDIENTS

FOR THE DOUGH

- 2** **teaspoons (8 grams) active dry yeast**
- 2** **teaspoons granulated sugar**
- 1** **cup warm water**
- ¼** **cup extra virgin olive oil, with extra for oiling the bowl and sheet pan**
- 2** **teaspoons kosher salt**
- 2 ½ - 3** **cups all-purpose flour**

FOR THE SAUCE

- 1** **can San Marzano whole tomatoes (14 oz.)**
- ¾** **teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt**
- 5** **grinds fresh black pepper**
- ⅓** **cup parsley, finely chopped**
- ½** **cup parmesan cheese, finely grated**

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE DOUGH

Step 1

In a large bowl, mix together the yeast, sugar, and water. Let sit for 5 minutes until the mixture is frothy.

Step 2

Add the olive oil and salt to the yeast mixture, and stir to combine. Add in 2 1/2 cups of flour, and mix until you have a shaggy dough that holds together, adding more flour if necessary.

Step 3

Turn out the dough onto a lightly floured surface and knead the dough until it is smooth and elastic, about 5-10 minutes, sprinkling the dough with more flour as necessary so it doesn't stick to the counter. Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl and cover with a dish towel. Let the dough rise for 1 1/2 hours, or until doubled in size.

TO MAKE THE SAUCE

Step 1

While the dough is rising, place the tomatoes and their juices in a medium bowl. Using your hands, crush the tomatoes into small pieces, removing the stems as you go. Mix in the salt, pepper, and parsley. Set aside until ready to use.

Step 2

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees.

Step 3

Lightly oil a half sheet pan, place your dough in the center of the pan, and stretch it out until it fills the whole pan.

Step 4

Spread the tomato sauce across the pizza dough and sprinkle the parmesan over the pizza. Press the tips of your fingers into the pizza to create small indentations to mix the cheese into the tomato sauce.

Step 5

Bake the pizza for 12-15 minutes until the bottom is golden. Let the pizza cool for 5 minutes and then serve.

Step 6

The pizza is best eaten just after it has come out of the oven, but it's also great reheated the next day. Growing up, my mom would always add some mozzarella cheese to the pizza before reheating, something I recommend.

Yield: 1 pizza, serves 4-6

