It’s Open Season on Jews in New York City
Of the hundreds of hate crimes committed against Jews in the city since 2018, many of them documented on camera, only a single perpetrator has served even one day in prison

BY ARMIN ROSEN

The attack that sent 31-year-old Yossi Herskop to the hospital was an unmysterious crime, the opposite of a stone-cold whodunnit. Security cameras recorded clear video of a group of four men approaching Herskop’s car, with two of them repeatedly punching him through the driver’s side window while his 5-year-old child sat in the back seat. Another camera recorded the license plate and model of the attackers’ getaway vehicle. The assault took place around 3:40 p.m. on July 13, 2022, on a busy street in Crown Heights. Herskop believes his assailants were identified later that evening.

In an ideal world, a victim’s personal background would be irrelevant to whether their attackers are arrested and prosecuted. But at least in theory, Herskop is someone with enough of a profile to keep the police and prosecutors focused on his case. The young Chabad Hasid is an energetic yet shrewdly understated local political activist—the kind of person who knows the total number of newly registered voters in Crown Heights off the top of his head, or who you might WhatsApp when you need to reach a particular City Council member later that afternoon. He also manages a large urgent care center in Crown Heights, a position of real civic significance during New York’s COVID nightmare. Herskop is also a personal friend of mine, although even people I am not friends with should expect the police to move quickly when they’re able to easily identify the people who bloodied them on camera in broad daylight in front of their child.

The police did not move quickly. No arrests were made during the two weeks after the attack, a span in which the getaway car got ticketed in a totally unrelated incident, Herskop says. On July 27, an exasperated Herskop tweeted: “No arrests have been made, despite the assailants’ vehicle having been seen all over the neighborhood. My son still has a lot of trauma from the incident & we now Uber instead of walk whenever we need to go out.” Perhaps not coincidentally, the first arrest in the case was made the day after that tweet, some two weeks after the attack. The first suspect was released on bail after the judge ordered a bond of $10,000, significantly less than the district attorney had requested, according to Herskop. Herskop
is confident that after a long period of delay, the NYPD is now making efforts toward arresting the second individual who physically attacked him.

“This was a perfect opportunity for them to do the right thing,” Hershkop told me. “Nobody was saying this isn’t a big deal and we shouldn’t make an arrest. Everybody was on the same page here.” As he explained, “it was an assault on a 5-year-old caught on camera. I didn’t think I’d have to fight for justice.”

Perhaps the attack, which stemmed from a seemingly innocuous dispute over a parking space—a common enough occurrence in a densely populated place like Crown Heights, and one that almost never ends with anyone in the hospital—was just too fraught of an event for the police to want to handle too aggressively. Maybe someone feared that drawing additional attention to a group of young Black men attacking a prominent Orthodox Jew would threaten to inflame tensions in a neighborhood with a long but mostly improving (and generally misunderstood) history of racial division.

Maybe, but maybe not: Overload in the New York court system, increasingly lenient prosecutors and judges, and a police department in which officers are quitting at a growing clip, all make it easier for even open-and-shut cases to languish, and for people at every level of the system to find excuses not to resolve them.

The dysfunctional handling of public order takes different forms across the city, and across the country: Philadelphia is experiencing record murder rates; San Francisco experimented with decriminalizing certain forms of property crime, at least until its pro-reform district attorney lost a recent recall vote. Everybody was on the same page here. As he explained, “it was an assault on a 5-year-old caught on camera. I didn’t think I’d have to fight for justice.”

He described the dysfunction of the system to handle. The NYPD’s Hate Crimes Task Force was not involved in investigating the attack on him, Hershkop told me.

Israel Bitton, executive director of Americans Against Antisemitism and one of the co-authors of the report, said the study aimed “to answer a simple question: Are there consequences for anti-Jewish hate crimes?” The document gives a clear answer: “In the majority of trackable cases, prosecution has been effectively nonexistent.” Some unknowable number of the 118 anti-Jewish hate crime suspects whose cases showed up in the state’s WebCrims database since 2018 were sent to state psychiatric institutions for an unknown period of time, instead of being criminally charged, Bitton explained. Fifteen took plea deals, although the study found no evidence that any of these agreements involved jail time. In 23 cases, the charges were dropped. The only conviction was for a relatively high-profile incident, in which the suspect choked and beat a visibly Jewish man in his mid-50s while he walked home from Shabbat day services in Crown Heights.

Deborah Halberstam, a veteran anti-hate crime activist based in Crown Heights, co-founded a civilian review board that advises the NYPD on how to proceed with incidents that could be classified as hate crimes. The group has been meeting each month for the past year. She stressed that any failure to punish such attacks isn’t a problem limited to Jewish victims. In a widely publicized case that past January, a 62-year-old Asian woman was attacked outside of her home in Queens. She fell into a coma and died 10 weeks later. Halbers-
as a hate crime, even though it seemed to have no other motive besides hatred of Asians. “It’s not against the Jewish community. It’s not against the Asian community,” Halberstam said of the rarity with which hate crimes charges are pursued. “It’s the broader picture.” Halberstam blames the sparse number of guilty verdicts on the vagueness of New York’s hate crimes statute, leading prosecutors to drop hate crime charges in order to pursue lesser allegations that can be more easily proven in court. “If you make the guidelines stricter, they don’t have as much leeway to get out of it,” Halberstam said.

A backlog in the criminal courts further gridlocks the system. In early 2022, the state had over 47,000 open criminal cases, an increase of 15% compared to the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020. Americans Against Antisemitism found that there were nine anti-Jewish hate crime prosecutions in the city that had been pending for two years or more.

The Americans Against Antisemitism analysis only refers to incidents that generated police reports and entered the criminal justice system. Some unknowable number of attacks on Jews occur beyond any official awareness. “Most hate crimes are not even reported in the first place,” says Dov Hikind, founder of Americans Against Antisemitism, and a former power broker in the New York State Assembly.

Hershkop agrees. “Eighty percent never even got to the point of making a police report,” he speculated, referring to Jewish victims of bias incidents. “That’s how we’re artificially hiding hate crimes. People are so burnt out and so not believing in the system that they don’t even make a police report.”

Even the Jews who do report what are obviously identity-motivated crimes against them can be treated with a revealing indifference. In June, 26-year-old Yizchak Goldstein was sucker-punched on East 33rd Street near Park Avenue at around 1 p.m. Goldstein, who was visiting from Miami, was wearing a kippah, unlike his nearby cousin. The attacker didn’t run off. “He squared off to fight,” Goldstein said. “He wasn’t afraid of the cops—he literally joked to me, call 911 … he was so confident.” When Goldstein did call the police, he discovered that the assailant, who had disappeared down the crowded street at a walking pace, was right not to be worried. The officers told Goldstein that they could not treat the assault as a hate crime because the attacker didn’t say anything antisemitic to him.

That wasn’t all. “They said that even if we catch this guy he’ll be out in a few hours and that this happens every single day,” Goldstein recalled. But at least the police arrived quickly, he said, “and were honest and upfront with me.” Goldstein said the NYPD’s Hate Crimes Task Force never contacted him, and that he only heard from the department one other time, when an officer wanted to confirm the location of the attack about a month later. No suspect was ever arrested.

When asked about these statements and for an update on the case, the department’s public information office replied to Tablet by email: “There are no arrests and the investigation remains ongoing.”

Whether it’s because of a lack of confidence in the authorities, fear about the consequences of coming forward, or a somewhat fatalistic view of the inevitability of antisemitism, some number of the city’s Jews believe that crimes against them aren’t worth reporting. The Jewish community is not unique in this respect, either. A range of different types of crime, from hate crimes against Asians to sexual assaults on the subway to bodega robberies are believed to be dramatically undercounted. One popular explanation for the supposed disconnect between the 75% of New Yorkers who say they are concerned about violent crime and the official crime rate, which has risen only slightly, is that the city is in a state of undue panic, with a fearmongering media and cynical public officials driving a false perception of declining public order. Another, perhaps more plausible explanation for this discrepancy is that the official crime rate itself is an undercount, and that ordinary poll respondents have either seen or experienced crimes more frequently than the official numbers reflect.

The growing sense of chaos, of which the failure to punish antisemitic attacks is a possible symptom, exposes a tension within the current governing project in New York and beyond. Criminal justice reform is aimed at correcting real and longstanding inequities; at the same time, rising crime denies large numbers of law-abiding citizens, most of them women or members of minority groups, of their basic right to safety. In the case of hate crimes, which are one of the most extreme ways that human beings can express their bigotry, newfound sensitivity toward the accused, however justified, clashes with a societywide crusade against bias and racism.

When irreconcilable visions of equity are in conflict—when it’s a stark choice between punishing a criminal and protecting a targeted group, for instance—a bizarre inertia prevails. Homeless encampments will be made permanent with the help of well-meaning aid groups and public service agencies, as in Los Angeles and San Francisco; public drug use will be turned into a supposedly manageable feature of city life even as living conditions plummet, as in Philadelphia’s Kensington neighborhood. Focusing all of society’s attention on the scourge of bigotry, only to refrain from prosecuting a spiking number of hate crimes, is the inevitable default position when no one tries to reconcile the gaps between people’s everyday needs and ascendental notions of fairness. When nearly everyone’s apparent goal is to create as little friction as possible, and to avoid pushing too hard against the gaping contradictions in how our cities are now governed, the result is situations like Yossi Herschkop’s—and maybe Aryeh Wolf’s, too.

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The Brief and Wondrous Life of Jewberg

The Latvian American financier and quasi-counterfeit ‘Pentagon analyst’ Dan Rapoport led the kind of life that makes any cause of his recent death—assassination, suicide, or pseudocide—all equally plausible

BY VLADISLAV DAVIDZON

My impossibly difficult friend Dan Rapoport played a dazzling array of roles throughout his tumultuous, colorful, and often very unhappy life. The inimitable Riga-born, Latvian American charmer was by vocation a banker, a financier, and occasional backchannel political broker—as well as an international man of mystery, an asset of multiple intelligence services, a hedonist, a stolid enemy of the Kremlin regime, a prankster internet troll, and a 32nd degree Freemason. He was also a legendary and incomparable host of bacchanals in Soho Rooms, his debauched Moscow nightclub, before being forced to return home to the United States and reinvent himself as a venture capitalist.

On Aug. 14, my erstwhile pal and man-about-town in Kyiv succumbed to his injuries after a mysterious fall out of the window of his Washington, D.C., apartment. He thus joins a growing list of recently defenestrated Russian businessmen, Putin enemies, former intelligence agents, and members of the government.

Writing about Rapoport is difficult, as the facts conmingle with the many myths of his own creation. Throughout the years I knew him in Kyiv, he had been mostly bored, drinking heavily and running the great multiyear scam of his alternate online identity, “David Jewberg.” In 2018, Bellingcat published a remarkable investigation of his alter ego: “‘Senior Pentagon Russia Analyst LTC David Jewberg’ maintained a popular Facebook page and was frequently quoted in Ukrainian and Russian media as a Pentagon insider related to topics concerning Ukraine and Russia. He represented himself as an actual person with the legal name 'David Jewberg,' not as a persona or pseudonym.” Dan spent years cultivating this bizarre identity, creating fake social security cards and military IDs for Jewberg as well as social media pages, which were “verified” by various Russia experts. Whether David Jewberg was a hilarious multiyear hoax carried out by one of the great performance artists of our time, or was actually an intelligence operation being run for or against the Russians, still remains unclear.

As a young man, Rapoport concluded his studies in finance at the University of Houston in Texas at the exact moment that the Soviet Union was dissolving. The timing, as always throughout his life, was excellent. He was promptly hired by an American bank that needed a young Russian-speaking associate to open up markets and serve as a middleman. Arriving in Russia in the autumn of 1991, he was part of the earliest wave of repatriated Western-educated professionals who would engage in piratical practices in the process of amassing tremendous fortunes. Rapoport had a knack for finding himself in historic situations. “I’ve just been a guy who was always at the right place at the right time,” he once admitted to me. He made his return to the post-Soviet world at the age of 21, he told me, via a first-class ticket to Siberia. This would set the pattern for the rest of his amusing, glorious, debased, and ultimately depressing life.

He was by all accounts a competent banker; in the ‘90s, he told me, he worked for and was close to the allegedly criminal Swiss American financier Marc Rich (who died in 2013). Soho Rooms, the Moscow nightclub Rapoport co-founded in the mid-oughts, was renowned for being the most depraved, glamorous, and hard-to-access club in the capital. Anyone who was anyone in Moscow in those years would flock to it. Rapoport once bragged to me of having dined at his private table there with eight of the FBI’s 10 most-wanted fugitives of the decade—including the flamboyant gangsters who would become household names in Russia, including “Yaponchik” (Vyacheslav Ivankov) and “Taiwanchik” (Alichzhan Tokhtakhunov).

In fact, Rapoport knew literally everybody, and became an expat celebrity in his own right. He would squire around every American and British film and sports star who passed through Moscow and introduce them to women. He eventually lost control of his share of the night club, claiming to have been expropriated from his business by the partners who were in cahoots with members of the Russian security services. The same transpired with his other Russian businesses. His Soho Rooms co-founder, Sergei Tkachenko, would likewise die from a fall from a window in 2019.

The loss of his club was only the start of the crackdown against Rapoport, who had become increasingly committed to the Russian opposition—the part of his character I most respected and admired—and deeply involved in Russian diaspora opposition circles. According to Bill Browder, CEO of Hermitage Capital Management, Rapoport was one of the first Moscow-based financiers who publicly supported Alexei Navalny.

Rapoport was later summarily kicked out of Russia under murky circumstances. A British intelligence official of my acquaintance, also a Freemason, once informed me over lunch that Rapoport...
had been given advance warning by other Freemasons inside the FSB that he would soon be arrested. He was told to leave the same night, which he did. Rapoport then spent several fruitless years attempting to get back at the Russians—but the best he could do was to get one of the security service agents who dispossessed him placed on a no-fly list within Russia for outstanding debts. (In other words, the guy had to drive to Minsk in order to get on a plane out of Belarus if he wanted to go to Europe—back when planes still flew to Minsk.) That is the sort of man he was: obsessive, honor-oriented, restless.

Rapoport was also emotionally cagey: oversensitive and high-strung, depressive and deeply proud. After immigrating from Soviet Latvia to Texas in 1980, he had attended some very poor schools. A gangly and bespectacled Jewish 10-year-old with an Eastern European accent among predominately African American classmates, he was badly bullied. In his graceful moments of disarming honesty, he would open up about the years in which he was beaten up every day after school. That may very well have been one source of his internal anguish: At parties he would alternate between imperious hauteur and touching, overly transparent sensitivity worthy of an emo kid listening to the latest Fall Out Boy album. He craved respect and would lash out if he thought it was not forthcoming. I once had to storm out of a dinner with him after he had insulted me, wrongly thinking that I was interrupting him in the midst of one of his monologues. Yet he was much too fantastical a figure, too fascinating, too fun, too well connected, and too full of excellent political gossip to be displeased with for long.

After leaving Moscow, he reluctantly moved to Washington, D.C.—that grayest, most formal, and least hedonistic of cities—where he was a neighbor of my family in the upscale Kalorama neighborhood. My relatives would visit him for tea in the stately house that he occupied before he was forced to sell it to Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner in the wake of his financially disastrous divorce from a Russian model. My relatives were alternately charmed, fascinated, and repulsed by him, his lifestyle, and his tall tales of 1990s Moscow: “I did not like his stories about flying around on private airplanes and picking out good-looking girls from a queue along with his oligarch pals like Oleg Deripaska and Mikhail Prokhorov,” explained my aunt. “But beneath this vulgar nouveau riche ‘new Russian’ game-playing exterior he was a wounded and very sensitive Jewish boy with a strong attachment to his family. He once spent several hours showing me pictures of his childhood and of his parents on his cellphone. He spoke in the most sweet and sensitive manner about his ancestors. I still do not know why he opened up to us.”

Rapoport would confess to me years later that he had been sitting in the garden of that house in Kalorama—after he had sold it to the first daughter of the United States—when he contemplated killing himself. He said he had put one of the many guns from his collection—he grew up in Texas, after all—into his mouth in order to play Russian roulette. But at that precise moment, he said, he received a call from an investor who wanted him to relocate to Kyiv to look after an investment fund there. Rapoport promptly took the gun out of his mouth and accepted the offer.

In Kyiv, he quickly distinguished himself: A larger-than-life character even in the historic, revolutionary atmosphere of post-Maidan Kyiv, a town full of such figures. After a while he met his next wife, a doctor, quit drinking, and had another child. He would spend his days playing the stock market and pretending to be Jewberg online. His nights were spent playing high-stakes poker with Ukrainian businessmen, oligarchs, and government ministers, one of whom insisted (on condition of anonymity) that he was “a degenerate gambler who had made disastrous gas and oil decisions for the country based on his gambling addiction.” A highly placed member of the Ukrainian government revealed to me during dinner in London last year that Rapoport had an admirable amount of self-control during those evenings.

In Kyiv, where a particular kind of intellectual Anglophone camaraderie is not easy to find, we gravitated toward one another after he moved there in 2016. He was widely and eclectically learned—a prodigious reader with countless quirky character traits and baroque habits. (He refused to eat chicken, for example, because it had once been a little dinosaur and he had “a thing about eating dinosaurs.”) In between his attempts to recruit me to join the Freemasons, we would spend hours arguing about the history of linguistics, Greek politics, anthropology, the history of Judaism, evolutionary biology, and the internecine internal politics of the French Revolution. He once read a hundred books on the history of neurobiology over the course of two months in order to prove a point.

He intended to move his young family to a house in Ternopil in western Ukraine and then, eventually, to Denmark. Out of a sense of survivor’s guilt, he would attempt to return to the capital after the battle of Kyiv ended in April of this year—but there was no business in Ukraine for him, and so he reluctantly returned to America, to what seemed to be mounting debts.

We had spoken by phone over the last few months, and he had been manic—if also generous—about offering me business advice. He had occasionally called me over the previous half-decade when he was looking out for capital for some business plan (on one occasion he wanted to invest in Ukrainian grain elevators). Over the last several months, he was reported to have been stiffed out of a payment by a
Russian venture capital firm and was in a dour mood. After he died a couple weeks ago, the Daily Mail reported that he had separated from his wife and that the former editor of the Russian Tatler had seen “Rapoport back in May at London’s swanky Connaught Bar, alleging that he was there ‘in the company of young girls.’” The Russian news outlet RBC reported that his widow has shut down all speculation of these rumors and others. “There were no suicide notes, no suicide, no trip to London, no breakup,” she said, adding that Rapoport’s death was being investigated by the authorities.

The last time Dan and I had dinner, it was in an upscale restaurant full of surreal anxiety in Kyiv. It was February 23rd, the night before the Russian bombing commenced. The restaurant was full of Ukrainian elites anxiously discussing what was about to happen. Dan regaled me for the umpteenth time with one of his favorite tall tales—about the time he allegedly seduced a young Britney Spears in exchange for a bag of cocaine, which I highly doubt was true. He marveled at how little money journalists make in comparison to venture capitalists and bankers, and also bitterly complained about the fact that his many enemies were now using “Jewberg” to try to ruin his life. At around 11 p.m., dessert was served and the evening reached its denouement. We both suddenly began receiving cascades of frantic phone calls from our sources telling us that the Russian bombing was about to begin and that Russian airborne paratroopers were about to land in northern Kyiv. We hugged goodbye—something I had never done with him before—and we told each other to take care in the war to come.

In the days before his death, Rapoport posted a picture on Facebook of Marlon Brando as Colonel Kurtz in Apocalypse Now, with the words, “The horror, the horror.” It is impossible to know whether it was the Russians or his own demons that got him in the end. Perhaps, as some of his innumerable friends and acquaintances continue to hope, Dan is still with us somehow, in the VIP section of a nightclub in the sky. His history of close escapes, pranks, and over-the-top schemes, both real and fake, leaves room for hope that perhaps he absconded from whatever creditors or Russian hitmen were after him, got plastic surgery, and disappeared to South America with a plane full of money. Dan Rapoport was an original—and there can be no higher praise. Wherever you are, soldier of fortune and my brother, I owe you dinner for having picked up the check the night before the war.

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**SPORTS**

### The Greatest Short Jewish Tennis Player in the World

Diego Schwartzman and those who love him on the thrill and heartbreak of the US Open and Argentina

BY MARTÍN SIVAK

Early on the morning of Aug. 17, the Argentine Jewish tennis ace Diego Schwartzman, known for his tireless play and backward-baseball-cap-wearing acrobatic flair, celebrated the start of his 30th year on a family Zoom that lasted until 3 a.m. Buenos Aires time, 2 a.m. in Cincinnati. There was a chocolate cake, candles, and a soda pop toast. A few hours earlier, on Aug. 16, his birthday, he had completed a great comeback against the Russian Aslan Karatsev, winning 7-6 (7-3), 3-6, 6-2. It was the second year in a row Schwartzman answered that he only asked if Diego also enjoyed the cocktail.

Birthday number 30 had a precise effect on him: It finally chased away the idea of eternal youth. “I’m now closer to retirement than to being young again,” he told me in a hotel bar on Lexington and 48th Street in New York City, where he’s staying to play in the US Open. He says he even has a number in mind for when he will stop playing professional tennis: 33. He ordered a lemonade, no sugar. Around us was the buzz ahead of the US Open, of players coming and going to training sessions in Queens, of managers, acquaintances, and friends in the sandbox of results and expectations, sharing the latest tour gossip. In his past 12 matches, Diego has won five and lost seven.

As we warm to our conversation, a man pounces on Diego and asks him for a photo, telling him that he had followed him to tournaments in Europe and the United States and that he saw him as a brother. The man confessed to being stimulated by a number of Martinis, which gave him the courage to ask if Diego also enjoyed the cocktail. Schwartzman answered that he only likes Fernet-Branca, a northern Italian aperitivo that is popular in Argentina.

After the man leaves, Schwartzman allows himself to talk about the sport
he loves the most: “Tennis is my job, but fútbol is what I like best,” he says. He played midfielder as a child, but he doesn’t play now, because the risk of injury is too great for a professional tennis player. Once he retires, he anticipates playing all the soccer that he couldn’t in his 12 years of life on a tennis court.

Schwartzman has become a realist about his own expectations for the US Open. His goal is to get to the second week, the round of 16. He speaks of the cruelty of tennis using a metaphor from martial arts: “You have one, two bad months, they give you a back-kick, and nobody steps in to defend the place you held for five years.”

On Feb. 18, 2013, a friend told me that I had to meet the future of Argentine tennis. The Buenos Aires Open, South America’s most prestigious tournament, was on. My friend was particularly short, and wanted to show the world what people his size were capable of.

The sun was shining on the Palermo neighborhood that day. I arrived to Guillermo Vilas Court, the clay court of the main stadium in the Buenos Aires Lawn Tennis Club, bringing my 2-year-old son in a stroller. Diego excelled for his height and for his strategies of chess-playing endurance: He could sustain long points until exasperating his rival. That day, Peque, as Schwartzman is known, then ranked 166th, won in the first round against the Brazilian Thomaz Bellucci, ranked 38th, 6-4, 4-6, 6-1. Diego was 20.

I saw him play again, years later, on a day of consecration, in February 2021, when he won the ATP Buenos Aires. In the final he crushed Francisco Cecundo, six years his junior, 6-1, 6-2. Ranked ninth in the world, it was the fourth tournament win in Schwartzman’s career and his first in his home country. “Last week”—after losing in a tournament in Cordoba, Argentina—“I thought I was the worst person in the country, and now I am very emotional and happy,” he proclaimed. “Ever since I was a kid I would come see this tournament, to watch my coach play. To win it makes me proud.”

Born in 1979 in Ciudad Evita, in Buenos Aires, Peque’s coach, Juan Ignacio Chela, reached 14th in the world in 2011 and won six tournaments, two more than Peque has won to date. He retired from tennis in 2012 to become an analyst on TV, and stayed retired until 2016, when he started training Diego. At first they worked together eight to 10 weeks a year. Chela recognized a lot of himself in his protégé. “He’s attentive to detail: tennis, the physical preparation, rest, his grip, how to wield the racket. His small size was something I considered when he called me. Until I got to know him and his virtues, his technique, his way of thinking. We always worked on the tactical side to improve his potential, learning to play 10 balls a point, without a winner, but with intentions that orient the game.”

Diego travels with a trainer—Chela or Alejandro Fabbrini—and a physical therapist. When practicing he normally does two exercise sessions a day, each of three-and-a-half hours, and one long tennis session of two-and-a-half hours. Preparing for the US Open, like for all Grand Slam events, includes not playing the week before, resting more than usual to handle the demands of five-set matches. The day before the competition he plays only 45 minutes. Once the schedule is released, he watches video with Chela and they start studying their rivals: How they play important moments in the match, how they approach tiebreaks. The night before, they build the game plan. “The pressure in New York is huge,” Chela says. “One good Grand Slam can change your year.”

In August 1992, Silvana and Ricardo Schwartzman decided, like many Argentine couples of that time, that their new baby boy would be called Diego, after Diego Armando Maradona. The soccer player had been a key part of the national team’s World Cup win in Mexico City in 1986, and again as runners-up in Italy in 1990, becoming the central figure of the national religion of the country.

In 1994, when the fourth Schwartzman child was 2 years old, Maradona tested positive for doping in the U.S. World Cup and was suspended. A few hours after the news broke, the soccer star dropped an indelible phrase, even in a storied career of sporting achievement, dramatic moments, and famous sayings: “They cut off my legs,” he said. That doping case, and above all an addiction to cocaine, affected his career and accelerated his retirement from soccer, which came in October of 1997. But as a tennis fan, and a fan of any sport where Argentina was competing, Maradona would show up at all the Davis Cup matches, where he’d unfurl his histrionics and euphoria on behalf of his country.

Maradona died on Nov. 25, 2020, shortly after his 60th birthday. Diego Schwartzman was already 28, and summing the high point of his career: In the ATP Masters in Rome, in his first Masters final, he beat Rafael Nadal for the first time. On Oct. 12, 2020, he reached No. 8 in the world rankings.

In Maradona’s last years, the two Diegos formed a friendship made of WhatsApp and audio messages. The former soccer star would write after matches that the tennis star had lost. When he lost to Nadal at Roland Garros in 2020, Maradona said: “Copy everything you can from the best, but not their limits. Every person is unique.”

Part of the bond between the Diegos came from their diminutive stature: Maradona stood 5-foot-5 and Schwartzman is 5-foot-7. An exceptional and extraordinary talent, Maradona debuted in first division at 16 years old, and had for years before that inspired trainers and recruiters to predict a luminous destiny. The young Schwartzman, on the other hand, was hardly assured of success. For years, he toiled among the peloton of very good tennis players, without expectations of more. He was short, and would never grow taller.

At 13, the Schwartzmans commissioned medical studies to determine how tall Diego might grow to, and one estimated that he would be 5-foot-5, maybe 5-foot-5 ½. His parents were opposed to growth treatments, using injections and hormones, similar to what an Argentine soccer player who had just debuted with Barcelona was doing. His name was Lionel Messi, now considered one of the game’s all-time greats. Messi is 5-foot-7.

Currently ranked 16th in the world,
Schwartzman is an anomaly in a sport that has become ever more physical. On average, his rivals have 6 inches on him, plus the added muscle that goes with larger body mass. His nickname, Peque, is diminutive: The Little One in Spanish.

“Peque” the name had nothing to do with his size, however—it was something he picked up as the youngest of four children. And the singularity of a small person reaching far beyond what his height might suggest of him has never really moved him. “When I enter onto a tennis court, I don’t think about how tall I am or how much bigger my opponent is. But if I were 4 to 6 inches taller, I might have a stronger serve or could hit with more power.” He adds: “I did want to be tall when I was a kid, but not because of tennis.”

Schwartzman is the shortest player in the top 100 as well as the highest-ranking Argentine on the tour; he is also the highest-ranking Jew. He proudly assumes both identities: Argentine and Jewish. He is also proud of being a player from the periphery, who competes against giants in places like London, Paris, Madrid, and New York. Tennis’s main circuit remains in Europe, and Peque lives in the far south of the Americas, from where he must travel farther than many other players. This too has both physical and mental costs.

Since 1853, when the Republic of Argentina adopted a political constitution modeled on U.S. federalism and liberalism from 1787, it became a country of immigrants. A local cliché serves to explain the demographics that resulted: Argentines are descended from boats, not from Incas or Aztecs like the Peruvians or Mexicans. Jewish organizations in Europe that coordinated with Argentine authorities to move large groups of people were highly successful in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a result, Argentina has the largest Jewish community in Latin America and the fifth largest in the world outside of Israel.

Diego’s maternal great-grandfather, Abraham Tuchsznaider, who joined that community, was born in 1900 in what is now Poland. He fought in the First World War. Before 1918, the train taking him and his regiment to the front detailed. Soldiers died or were wounded; some, like Peque’s grandfather’s father, abandoned the column and deserted. In the chaos of that incident, Abraham found an identification document for one Moises Naselzky. After days of trekking, he found his way to a boat at a seaport.

According to Sebastián Torok in an article published in La Nación, it is believed that Abraham arrived in 1921 and stayed in a temporary Immigrant Hotel, where he was quarantined along with other third-class passengers entering Buenos Aires. Once in the Argentine capital, he managed to set himself up in Villa Crespo, not far from the geographical center of the city. Two years later, he was reunited with his wife, Sara (who entered Argentina under her maiden name Buchbinder) and his daughter Olga. They had three more daughters: Aida, Julia, and Celia. Celia married Mauricio Daiez and had three daughters. One was Silvana, Peque’s mother. The family’s fabric factory burned down. Financial difficulties led to Mauricio’s depression, which overcame him. His wife Celia lifted the family out of misery. “Chiche,” as she was known, sold sheets door-to-door. She then made and sold clothes with an aunt.

The Schwartzmans keep the family history in an unpublished book (The History of a Family by Gregorio Schwartzman) and through oral tradition. According to the latter, from what Luis Schwartzman told me from Paraguay, the family holds that in the mid-19th century, when Russian authorities started requiring last names, Jews chose descriptive monikers. Theirs chose Schwartzmann, which in Yiddish means the black(-suited) ones. The first-mentioned in the genealogical tree, Jaim Schwartzman, was born in Obodivka, Ukraine, around 1856. A part of the family arrived in Buenos Aires by ship in 1908 and started to diversify: Some went to the Jewish colonies of Entre Rios, Argentina, and another branch went to Paraguay. In August of 1921, Isaac Schwartzman was born in Buenos Aires. With his wife, Isabel Lips, born in Villa Angela, Entre Rios, they had two children and made their living making coat hangers for wholesale. The younger of the two is Ricardo, the father of the tennis player.

The Club Nautico Hacoaj was the first, most important, and the strongest connection Diego had with the Jewish collective in Argentina. Jewish social and sporting clubs like Hacoaj were fundamental to the immigrants’ adaptation to the world of work and manufacturing in their new trans-Atlantic homeland.

Hacoaj, the most modern of the 19th-century clubs, owes its name to the Tigre River delta and a group of 20 Jewish rowers who were rejected from a traditional rowing club in 1935. It was founded as the Club Nautico Israelita. Later, a group of members voted for the new name Club Nautico Hacoaj, in honor of the Hakoah of Vienna, which was destroyed by the Nazis when they took the Austrian capital.

Hacoaj today has 8,000 members (1,000 of whom play tennis), 21 sports, and five locations (four in Tigre and one in Buenos Aires). The most popular sports are field hockey and soccer. There have been Olympic rowers, and one soccer player selected for the national squad, Daniel Braivolsky. Players have come out of the club to represent Las Leonas, the women’s National Field Hockey team.

Ten days before the start of the US
Open, I drove north from the capital to Tigre, a suburb where one of the Hacoaj’s branches is located. The Parana River forms a confluence there with tributaries that spill into the River Plate and a giant delta island, like that of the Nile in Egypt.

I was met there by Alejandro de la Rua, alias Nano, the tennis coordinator for the last 37 years. He was just back from Israel, where he had attended his first Maccabae Games.

We have coffee in his office, from which we could see the recently inaugurated Central Court Diego “Peque” Schwartzman. Twenty years ago there was a backboard there. “I remember,” Nano says, “seeing Peque every weekend hitting against that wall. It was striking because he was so small. For his body type he didn’t hit hard, he could not drive the ball nor stroke a powerful backhand, and he volleyed well even though he was short at the net. His principal virtue was his steady hand, and above all a prodigious mind. Very intelligent, hardworking, with a winning mentality, very brave. But he had an X factor that you couldn’t see. There are many filters that separate players. I remember him living to ask questions.”

Nano tells stories of the players that were way ahead of Peque. Players like Agustin Bellotti, who won the Junior French Open in 2010 and was projected to go much further, but who never went above 166th, back in 2013. No one from that generation made it to the top 100. He told me about one player who was No. 1 at ages 12 and 14, with a bright future. But he was all talent, and at 16 he lost interest. “Where is he now?” I asked. “He has a fabric company in Once”—a traditionally Jewish shopping area of Buenos Aires. Peque’s legend grows in comparison.

A banner beside that new central court has Schwartzman’s bio. “Born and raised in Hacoaj. Top 10 in world tennis (2020). Olympic athlete. Argentinian Davis Cup player. Talent, perseverance, Jewish values, humility. Symbol and pride of Hacoaj.” The honoree attended the inauguration in December of 2021. “It was a little strange to have a court named after me, especially for me as I’m fairly introverted, and try not to show too much,” Diego said. “But from age 7 to 14 I would come every weekend to Hacoaj with my parents. It’s where I first picked up a racket.”

Peque played interclub leagues for Hacoaj, competitions with two singles matches and one doubles for teams of four in each category. Peque won 20. He occasionally heard antisemitic comments there. Ricardo got into a fight with another parent from a rival club, Gimnasia Esgrima de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Fencing Gym), when he heard “he had to be Jewish.” Hacoaj is not a religious club and is not closed on the Sabbath. Most of its members are not observant.

Nano showed me around that sunny Saturday. There’s a replica of the statue of David, and the club’s slogan is painted everywhere: Live in Happiness. There were paddleball courts, a subaquatic hockey pool, rowers out practicing without boats or oars. The river was low and gave off an odor. We passed the Tarbut Kinder and the first and second grades of the ORT, two of the schools Hacoaj runs onsite. In Tigre, Hacoaj also has a country club, an island, and a marina, as well as gated residences, new buildings, and bungalows as part of a real estate development. “Members have plenty of means, which makes them demanding,” Nano explains. Peque’s family are no longer members.

On Aug. 11 of this year, the Argentine government announced that the July inflation rate had reached 7.4%, the highest in 20 years. At the time, talk in mainstream Argentine media was all about an article in The New York Times that invited its readers to compare the United States with Argentina: “Think 9% Inflation Is Bad? Try 90%.” In reality, that 90% could be more like 100%. That Thursday, toward the end of the afternoon, Silvana Schwartzman, Diego’s mother, told me she knew Argentina’s successive economic crises intimately. “When Diego was born in 1992, we had exhausted everything: We literally had nothing to eat,” she told me.

Before Argentina’s string of economic crises began, the Schwartzmans, with her husband Ricardo at the head, had run a successful business called Vainilla, which had 20 employees making women’s accessories like bracelets, hoops, and barrettes. Ricardo would bring back merch samples from trips to the United States and Europe, and organize their production and sales. He diversified into another successful business in licensing Batman products.

While Ricardo’s company survived the devastating hyperinflation of 1989, which went from 460% in April to 764% in May, it did not outlast the economic policy that was used to try to halt inflation. Starting in 1991, the National Congress passed the Convertibility Plan, which pegged the Argentine peso to the U.S. dollar and precipitated aid from the United States and the International Monetary Fund. It did stop inflation, and generated a market-friendly business environment, stimulating growth, selling off public utilities, public transport, communications, and mining rights that landed in private hands. It also meant the demise of Argentine manufacturing amid a flood of imports.

Ricardo Schwartzman’s company, according to his version, failed for those reasons. The family lost their two apartments and their weekend home, and stopped spending summers in Uruguay. The children had to seek scholarships to keep studying in the Jewish private schools Ort and Betel, and the family moved into a rented apartment. This is when Silvana became pregnant with Diego. “There was no chance to get him out,” was her way of referring to medically terminating the pregnancy.

We were talking in a café in one of the towers of Belgrano, an upper-middle-class residential area in the north of Buenos Aires. Silvana was wearing tennis-style athletic gear. In the chair next to her she rested the Wimbledon racket that she had brought back from her recent trip to England to attend the Grand Slam event. It was 7 p.m., and we wouldn’t part ways until 10 that night.

After Diego’s birth, Ricardo found a way out of bankruptcy. In a store window at a mall he saw plastic pacifiers that had become popular among adolescents and youths. He bought some, took them to a plastic injector he knew and they mocked up three forms. According to family lore, he sold 2 million of the
pacifiers in just a few months, earning some $300,000. With those profits they got back on their feet and paid debts, but the teen pacifier craze was short-lived—and the next Argentine financial crisis, in 2001, did them in again.

From the end of 2001 into 2002, Argentina had five presidents in 10 days. The economy collapsed, and the magic formula of 1 peso to the dollar became unsustainable. Currency exchanges went haywire (today a dollar costs 300 pesos on the black market), wrecking many businesses like the one belonging to the young tennis player’s family. At ages 9 and 10, Diego won 24 tournaments. This new bankruptcy put his continuation in the sport in jeopardy.

“When I told him I’d prostitute myself before making him leave tennis,” Silvana said.

Instead, Silvana found work as a decorator on the Avenida Santa Fe near Larrea Street, a shopping area in the tony Barrio Norte of the Argentine capital, while Ricardo saw another opportunity. At a Maccabee game he saw the silicone bracelets that had become popular with athletes, Tour de France cyclists, Hollywood celebrities, and others who wore them as part of a cancer awareness campaign. Ricardo again turned to the plastic injector, and ramped up a massive run of bracelets. Silvana took charge of distribution and sales at the tournaments she was attending. She would bring a bag with 4,000 bracelets. Diego and other players helped sell them and kept 20% of sales. The bracelets financed the family life and Diego’s tennis career—which still needed more support.

At the time, the Argentine Tennis Association (AAT, for its Spanish initials) selected a group of tennis players whose travel it would underwrite, but Diego was not among them. So Ricardo would frantically hunt for sponsors among friends, acquaintances, and institutions like the Club Nautico Hacoaj, where Diego practiced. Ricardo remembers trying to persuade people with Diego’s good results, and potential sponsors replied by expressing the limits they saw in his son’s small stature.

The situation changed when a friend from Hacoaj put Ricardo in touch with an investor, who became part of a consortium. Ricardo, who prefers not to name them, made them all sign a six-month contract, stating that they would pay for doctors, trainers, physical therapists, hotels, and travel. In return, they would keep 90% of Diego’s winnings. The contract was signed when Diego turned 16.

“We started with 90% for the sponsors, and 10% for Diego, and if he won X amount of dollars it moved to 70%-30%. Once Diego would pass the million-dollar-a-year mark, Diego would keep 90%,” Ricardo said. On Diego’s 30th birthday this month, the contract expired, although the patrons remain linked to his career in other ways. For Diego, they are like uncles.

As a teenager Diego started psychological treatment, to treat a number of fears that were holding him back. “He needed to break away from me because we were too close: He didn’t want to travel to tournaments if I didn’t go,” Silvana said, talking about how she chaperoned Diego to tournaments during the periods when money lacked, and how she tried to fulfill Diego’s main request, which was that there be a television in the hotel room.

Years later, US Open fans in 2017 witnessed some of this mother-son bond. It was Sept. 1, when Diego beat Marin Cilic, the fifth seed, 4-6, 7-5, 7-5, 6-4. In the fourth game of the first set, Schwartzman started to make signs toward the stands. When the chair umpire asked what was going on, the Argentine answered: “It’s my mother,” referring to her bombastic gestures at each point he lost. Silvana left his field of view.

When she watches Diego on television, she’s even more nervous. She lifts weights and does situps. She gets chills. “The day he beat Nadal I thought I was having a stroke,” she told me. She shows me her Instagram feed where you can see her way of celebrating his victories.

When Diego travels, Silvana stays at her son’s home in a gated neighborhood called Nordelta, in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, and watches the two dogs, Bob and Ziggy. Silvana says she lives the life of a millionaire in Nordelta, and of a plebe in Villa Crespo in downtown Buenos Aires. She still works as an interior designer. Her expertise is in by-the-hour hotels, where couples enjoy rooms with mirrors and other stimulating décor.

Ricardo tends to the family business selling hipstery apparel at Guinche 21, just off the Plaza Serano de Palermo, a central tourist spot in the Argentine capital. His partners are his son Matías and his son-in-law Marcelo Alvarez. They sell hats, T-shirts, bags, men’s bathing suits. Diego models the clothes.

Ricardo was in the news earlier this year for having been attacked. “He started telling me he was going to cut my face,” Ricardo recounts. The scene was caught on security camera video and was broadcast in the national media. The thief was caught, his switchblade impounded along with the stolen booty: cash, a cell phone, a speaker, and two backpacks with eight hats worth some 32,000 pesos, or less than $110.

At that same store is where we met.
We crossed slowly to a café on the opposite side of the street. Ricardo moves with a walker. Three years ago, they operated on three herniated discs and a year later he felt nothing in his leg: The surgeons had blocked a nerve leading into the quadriiceps. Since then he has only been able to walk with help, and he has become more emotional. He cried twice in the two hours of our talk, recalling some of his son’s sporting triumphs, and the economic difficulties he had lived through. He spoke with enthusiasm about the good times he had as a businessman, and with pain when talking about his bankruptcies and debacles. He never fully recovered financially, and still rents the place where he lives with his wife.

“I never thought Diego would go so far in tennis,” he told me. “In my most optimistic days I thought he might be top 100.”

Like his wife, Ricardo gets worked up watching Diego play. When a match is going badly, he leaves to take a drive to get away from the TV. “I try not to write to him when he’s in competition. We’ve been more in touch lately. Before he was colder to me. He’s used to being alone on court. But since he’s found a girlfriend he’s become more affectionate. He calls me to see how I’m doing.”

Before we say goodbye he tells me details of the robbery and asks me a question: “Did you know that right around that same time they robbed Diego?”

Between Wimbledon, in June, and the beginning of the US Open this week, Peque did not have his best months. In preparation for Wimbledon, he traveled to England to the ATP in Eastbourne: He lost on June 22 in the first round. When he returned to his hotel room, he found his backpack—where he had money, a watch, credit cards, and even his passport—was gone. At Wimbledon, he lost in the second round to Liam Broady (ranked 152nd in the world) in a match he had in hand, up two sets to one and 3-0 in the fourth, when Broady counterattacked, winning the tie-breaker 8-6 and then cruising in the fifth, 6-1.

Twenty days later, Peque lost in the first round of the ATP 500 in Hamburg. “It’s frustrating … I can’t believe what’s happening. Enough, Juan. Enough, I can’t anymore,” he yelled in the general direction of his coach during his debut at the clay court tournament, where he was seeded third. A Finn, Emil Ruusuvuori (43rd), beat him 7-5, 6-4 in two hours and 22 minutes. When they were at 3-3 in the second set, Diego broke his racket on the clay. Four days earlier he had lost 6-1, 6-0 in the quarterfinals of the ATP Bastad, against the veteran Spaniard Pablo Carreno Busta.

In July, he returned to Buenos Aires to see his family and friends and to prepare for the North American leg of the circuit. That’s when we made arrangements to meet in New York, ahead of the US Open.

In August, the North American tour started in Toronto, and from there to Cincinnati. In Canada, Diego lost in the second round to Alberto Ramos Vinolas (ranked 43rd). In Cincinnati he won his first two matches and in the third lost to Stefanos Tsitsipas (No. 7), 6-3, 6-3. Diego posted to Instagram: “Twisted day today! Congrats to @stefanostsitsipas98 for the win ... but a positive week personally returning to feeling competitive again.”

In New York he posted photos to Instagram of him and his girlfriend, Eugenia De Martino, who follows him for most of the tour. They settled into the Hamptons to rest up in preparation for the US Open.

Last Friday I watched Schwartzman training on Practice Court 8 at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. Chela helped him under the oppressive midday heat. He was hitting against the Serbian Dusan Lajovic. Schwartzman was wearing a yellow hat and a green-toned outfit. He tells our photographer where to stand during practice. He seems serious. He strikes a backhand, jumping in a perfect, singly graceful and forceful movement. He conserves his energy. The Serbian offers him a dropshot that he doesn’t chase, but he tells Chela: “I’d get that one.”

Nearby is Juan ‘Pico’ Monaco, former world No. 10 and Schwartzman’s manager along with other players and former players. Pico helped Diego when he was young, sparring with him, inviting him to warm-up tournaments in Tandil, Buenos Aires, and Uruguay, and seeing his potential. Now he serves as an agent helping him with his image and his relationship with sponsors. “Brands like him for his charisma and because he’s beloved on the circuit,” Pico tells me while keeping one eye on the practice session.

“Good one, Nene,” a friend says when Diego rips a passing shot down the line. Monaco, who just got back from Israel two weeks ago, wanted Peque to play the ATP Tel Aviv at the end of September. The idea would be to combine that tournament with some clinics and talks. “He’s never been to Israel, and this is a great chance to go: Because of his family’s story it would be a historic trip.”

Back in the New York hotel bar I asked Diego about his relationship to Judaism.
He spoke about the Hacoaj, the festivals and rituals, family reunions, Middle Eastern food. His closest friends now are from BarKojba, the Jewish club that Diego’s brother Matías joined. Unlike his brothers and sisters, who all went to Jewish schools and were bar and bat mitzvahed, Diego missed out because that period of his life coincided with the family’s time of hardship. He seems very excited by his upcoming first trip to Israel.

After tennis, he says he would like to work organizing sporting events, in marketing. And also to work outside of tennis, investing and financing other people’s projects. “Also to get to know worlds I don’t know, to travel for fun instead of traveling to play tennis, which is completely different. What I find most difficult about tennis is the travel,” he says, leaving his lemonade half finished.

At the end of our conversation there were still 72 hours before his first match at the US Open, but Diego was already back into the details and work of the life of an elite tennis player. He held forth on the differing velocities of the different courts at the Tennis Center and how much he prefers playing at night in New York’s September humidity. His debut was scheduled for Tuesday at 8:15 p.m. against the American Jack Sock. Clumsily, I asked him if he still gets nervous in matches. “Of course,” he says. “You don’t get nervous before an important interview? I get nerves. The key is knowing how to control them.”

On Tuesday, Diego entered Louis Armstrong Stadium after 9 p.m., shuffling his feet with short and quick movements. Without his hat on you could see his serious and concentrated face and recognize some of those nerves he had talked about. The conditions were right for him in New York City: a humid night on a slower-playing court. During the warm-ups, the fans made clear they’d been visiting the drinks stand.

Sock was also born in 1992 and had also been in the world top 10 in 2017, but had fallen to 107th. The match had barely begun before Sock was overwhelming Diego with whipped forehands and a serve breaking 130 mph. Diego, known for having one of the best return games on the circuit, was erratic with that celebrated part of his game, and with the rest of his game as well. He failed to impose long points as planned, and nothing of what he’d practiced the week before seemed to be working for him. He was exasperated by his unforced errors, sharing his frustration with his box: His coach Cheila, his manager Monaco, and his girlfriend. He vented by smacking his shoes as if knocking them clean of clay. After losing the first set 6-3, the second was more even, but in a key moment he dumped an easy volley, sending him into a funk: He lost the second set 7-5.

Schwartzman, losing badly to Jack Sock of the United States in the first round of this year’s US Open, was saved by Sock conceding in the fourth set due to back problems.

Now and again you could hear “Vamos, Diego!” with an Argentine accent, and once, but only once, a group of Argentines easily identified by their national and Boca Juniors soccer jerseys. In parallel, Stiller waited patiently for a security cordon of four police escorts to form around him, and he left smiling after one selfie with a fan but without stopping for autographs, nor for me as I stood waiting on his path to ask him why he was such a fan of Diego’s.

I did have part of the answer already. During last year’s US Open he had tweeted several times during one of Schwartzman’s matches: “Love his heart.”

translated from Spanish by Matthew Fishbane.

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ARTS & LETTERS

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Three separate antisemitic attacks in recent days against members of New York City’s Hasidic community add to the climbing number of hate crimes against the city’s Jewish population. Some footage of the attacks against visibly Jewish men—described by the New York City police department as a “hate crime assault pattern”—have circulated online, though the perpetrators remain at large. On Sunday, two victims were attacked separately by groups of young men, with at least one attacker involved in both incidents. In incidents roughly six hours apart, the victims were sprayed with chemical fire extinguishers; one dodged the fire extinguisher canister hurled at him before he was slapped in the face by an attacker. Monday’s attack involved a man in traditional Jewish clothing being slapped in the face before his attacker fled the scene.

As Italy heads into contentious national elections in September, hedge funds have lined up bets that Italy’s bond market is going to collapse and that the country will soon default on its debts. Last month the International Monetary Fund predicted that Italy’s economy would face a 5% contraction this year due to Russian oil embargoes and soaring energy costs—Italy is “the most exposed [country] in terms of what happens to gas prices,” one hedge fund investment officer noted—and now investors are as confident that Italy is nearing an economic collapse as they were in 2008.

The number of homes in New Jersey owned by limited liability corporations, or LLCs, has increased by more than 500% since 2012, from some 12,000 homes that year to more than 72,000 as of 2021, driving housing inventory to historic lows and home prices to historic highs. According to an investigation by the Asbury Park Press, LLCs have captured as much as $8 billion worth of inventory in the area, largely by being able to outbid regular buyers with all-cash offers. A big chunk of these purchases are being made by venture capital firms; in the first quarter of 2021, for instance, venture capital firms purchased 15% of available housing inventory nationwide, using their troves of cash and low corporate interest rates to outbid families trying to purchase a home.

An upcoming clinical trial for an experimental organ procedure could lead to a new breakthrough medical technology that would dramatically alter how patients with diseased organs are treated. In Boston in September, a group of 12 volunteers with end-stage liver disease will receive doses of healthy liver cells injected into specific lymph nodes, in the hopes of growing one or several mini livers inside their body. The new livers would take over core liver functions from the diseased organ and potentially generate healthy cells that would allow the bad organ to heal itself.

20 million: The number of American households currently behind on their utility bills—the most ever, as the country grapples with energy prices that are up by as much as 15% compared with 2021. “I expect a tsunami of shutoffs,” one analyst said of the summer heat that will continue to drive up demand. California reported a 40% increase in late utilities payments since 2020; New Jersey saw a 30% increase of tardy utility bills. There is a comparable crisis playing out in Europe, but there the governments are quickly working to help families pay their electricity bills; in the United States meanwhile, there has been little discussion of the issue and even less action.
DIFFERENT RELIGIONS HAVE A VERSION OF THE SAME Joke: How did the rabbi (or pastor) get rid of a bat infestation in their synagogue (or church)? By giving the creatures bar mitzvahs (or by confirming them)—“and they never came back.” The joke gets at a truth universally acknowledged: It’s hard for organized religions to retain young people.

Although their religion dates back less than 200 years, Baha’is are no different. “I hear anecdotes about people going off to college,” said Joyce Litoff, from the U.S. Baha’i National Center Communications Office, “and they may think themselves a Baha’i, but like many people leaving home for the first time, they’re kind of experimenting.” (Still, she noted, “many of them come back to the faith.”) The Bahá’ís have a rite of passage for adolescent believers, who at 15 years old can formally declare themselves members by signing a declaration card affirming their belief in the tenets of the religion. However, the faith has also developed a singular focus on even younger people, who have not yet made that declaration.

The Bahá’í Junior Youth Empowerment Program is only about 20 years old, having begun in Colombia, primarily as part of a literacy program. It’s a product of the Ruhi Institute, which falls under Colombia’s national Bahá’í Spiritual Assembly (any locality with nine or more Bahá’ís may form a Spiritual Assembly, the governing body for the local faith community), and is dedicated “to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people.” However, its influence now extends to Baha’is around the globe through the materials put out by its publishing wing, DL Publications. The multidisciplinary program has a simple mission: world peace, one small step at a time.

Bahá’ís are dedicated to transformation of both the self and the globe that will culminate in a universal peace, in which worldwide material and spiritual prosperity reigns, and a dynamic harmony allows humanity to realize its full potential. They believe this era was inaugurated in mid-19th-century Persia, through the teachings of their founder, the Bahá’u’lláh, (the son of a Persian royal court minister born in 1817, his title means “the Glory of God”), and his ideological predecessor and contemporary, the Bab, (meaning “Gate”), who they believe prepared the ground for the Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. These two figures’ words constitute the Bahá’í faith’s sacred writings, which are focused on the belief that all religions are derived from one God, the components of which form “one unfolding religion,” which has been progressively revealed throughout human history.

Global peace isn’t an abstraction for Bahá’ís, whose central administrative body, the Universal House of Justice, is located not in the religion’s native Iran, but in Haifa, Israel, due to the Persian government’s hostility to the Bahá’u’lláh in his own time. It was during his imprisonment in Tehran as a follower of the Bab that he experienced what he identified as a divine revelation. This realization, which the Bahá’ís liken to Moses at the Burning Bush, the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ in the form of a dove at his baptism in the river Jordan, and the Buddha’s enlightenment under the bodhi tree, was that he had been appointed the Bahá’u’lláh, the “Divine Educator for this day,” tasked with sharing the message of impending world unity. He was ultimately expelled from his native country, and died a captive of the Ottoman Empire in what is today Akko, Israel. State suppression of the Bahá’í religion continued after Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979, when Bahá’ís were expelled from university education and teaching, and it persists up until today. In the 21st century, educators in Iran are still subject to imprisonment for conducting informal higher-level education of Bahá’i youth.

Nevertheless, both material and spiritual education remain crucial to the Bahá’ís, for whom religion and science are complementary, and who believe that universal education is a necessary component of world peace. Actor Rainn Wilson (The Office’s Dwight Schrute) is a “cradle” Bahá’í who wandered away from the faith as a young adult, only to return later in life, and he credits Ruhi Institute classes with his wife’s eventual conversion as an adult. The Junior Youth Empowerment Program, for young people between the ages of roughly 12 and 15, forms one of four Bahá’í “core activities” through the institute, gatherings meant to foster social action and individual spiritual growth through community discussions. The other three core activities...
include classes for younger children between 5 and 11, devotional prayer gatherings, and study circles of Ruhi Institute materials for adults. Baha’i informational literature describes its training institute curricula as “an ongoing conversation taking place among friends in thousands upon thousands of spaces,” a form of distance-learning that systematically connects Baha’i communities through common frames of reference and understanding. This uniformity is a crucial concept in a faith dedicated to unity of peoples.

The primary course materials for the Junior Youth Empowerment Program curriculum are workbooks, which encompass subjects like mathematics and literacy, and are taught through hypothetical scenarios featuring fictional young people. They’re part academic, part moral object lesson. For example, the book Thinking About Numbers juxtaposes discussions between a young student and their teacher about ethical labor practices, with word problems you might see in a middle-school pre-algebra book. Apart from the workbooks, the Junior Youth Empowerment Program is a lot like scouting: Meetings are held regularly, typically weekly, along with annual camps, and they’re designed to be led by the young people themselves. Groups are presided over by an older trained facilitator, called an animator, whose primary function is to draw out what the Baha’is see as youth’s nascent enthusiasm for justice, through small, grassroots-level community service projects. Animators motivate groups, serve as a sounding board for ideas, and answer questions, as the young people they oversee work to understand the world they’re trying to change.

Early adolescence is a developmental period that many cultures tend to write off as difficult and unpleasant, merely to be endured and survived by both parent and child alike. Baha’is, on the other hand, take this time seriously—and not just for individuals, but for humanity as a whole. While the Baha’i faith itself is relatively recent, it takes a long view: Every 500 to 1,000 years, they believe, a new spiritual teacher arrives to reveal more divine truth, according to humanity’s ability to receive it. They acknowledge Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as being among those teachers, and most recently, the Bab and the Baha’u’llah.

Those teachings can be condensed as follows, and appear frequently in Baha’i literature:

- We are one human family
- World religions are from one God
- Prejudice of all forms must end
- Women and men are equal
- We must provide education for all
- Justice and equity are the foundations of peace
- Science and religion are in harmony

Having passed through “its stages of infancy and childhood, establishing unity at the level of the family, tribe, and nation,” according to a pamphlet celebrating the bicentennial of the Baha’u’llah’s and Bab’s births, “we are now passing through a turbulent adolescence and nearing a stage of maturity, when unity can be realized at the global level.” The Junior Youth Empowerment Program takes much the same view when dealing with turbulent individuals in early adolescence, not shrinking away from the challenges presented by the age, certain that true maturity will follow. In a Journal of Baha’i Studies article, author Sona Farid-Arbab wrote that the Baha’u’llah’s oldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (known as the Guardian of the Baha’i Faith, who kept and advanced its teachings after its founder’s death), described his grandfather’s vision of a culminating new “race of men, incomparable in character.” Farid-Arbab wryly acknowledges that “their emergence will not be a sudden phenomenon.”

Accordingly, Baha’is can face the turbulent adolescence, either on an individual or global level, with equanimity, since they see it as a promise of great things to come. “Some people think that we’re really Pollyannish,” said Litoff. But Baha’is are playing the long game: “We’re focusing on the building of this foundation for the future maturity,” she said. Of course Baha’is are saddened by global strife and tribulation, she explained, but they are “not too wrapped up in the current state of the world.” Rather, they are pragmatic. “We don’t wring our hands,” Litoff said, “because we have work to do.”

Around the time the Ruhi Institute was developing its Junior Youth courses, at the turn of the 21st century, MRI technology was beginning to confirm that adolescence was a developmental phase of tremendous cognitive growth, akin almost to the one undergone in the first few years of life. In her book And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School, author Judith Warner describes how in 1999, the National Institute of Mental
Health determined that boys of around 12 years old and girls around 11 years old underwent an “overproduction” in the frontal lobes of their brains, the executive functioning part of the brain focused on “organizing, planning, maintaining self-control, and strategizing,” which was complemented by a “pruning” of the synapses the brain no longer needed, rendering more efficient the connections that remained. A parallel discovery by researchers showed that a simultaneous process helps accelerate the process by which different regions of the brain communicate. “These were enormous discoveries,” Warner writes, “For the first time, they provided a biological explanation for the age-old observation that something special seems to happen to the 12-year-old human mind [...] Kids really do become more able to reason, reflect, and engage in formal learning right around puberty.” Those changes include improved abstract thinking, increased self-awareness and empathy, and the ability to consider a problem from different perspectives. Warner writes that neuroscientists believe these changes are lifelong, meaning early adolescence is, a “phase that, if things go well, can help kids get the foundational building blocks in place for success in their later lives.”

The Baha’i Junior Youth Empowerment Program philosophy corresponds with the findings of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill psychologist Mitch Prinstein, whose work Warner describes in her book. She writes that Prinstein believes the brain circuitry of kids between the ages of 10 and 13 is primed to be especially receptive to approval, admiration, improved social standing, and being noticed, and preteens and early teens are more likely to act in pursuit of them more “than at any other point in their lives.” Litoff said the program, which channels the energy of adolescence into a productive, outward-looking focus on service to others, acknowledges that every child goes through a period of trying to determine their personal values and what they believe at this time in their lives.

Because of this philosophy, the animators are there to let young members work together to identify needs in their own neighborhoods, sometimes surveying neighbors to do so, and to work to meet those needs themselves, with minimal interference. These service projects can be small: Junior Youth animator Naghmeh Taefi, a cheerful young woman who spoke to me enthusiastically about her work, gave the example of a group of young people who noticed a lot of fast traffic in an area where children liked to play, so they lobbied their home owners association to install a “Slow—Children Playing” sign. As another Baha’i I spoke with observed about this particular project, it not only gave the young people a sense of accomplishment and of agency, it also gave them practical real-world skills for engaging with institutions and authorities in order to affect a desired outcome.

According to Farid-Arbab’s Baha’i Studies article, at the program’s inception, “it was noticed that the Baha’i faith was attracting large numbers of youth between the ages of 12 and 15. They tended to form a very special kind of attachment,” to both the faith and its ideals. Based on the results the Baha’is saw as they rolled out the Junior Youth program, first in Colombia, then in more and more locations, “[t]housands of [y]oungsters,” said the article, formed “a testimony to the efficacy of its content and the spiritual and social concepts.” These results “made it clear that much of the literature on the characteristics of individuals in this age range was bound to specific cultures and historical circumstances and did not offer sufficient insight into the reality of a human being during early adolescence.”

And course materials in the Junior Youth Program workbook series do not shy away from reality. Glimmers of Hope, a series of lessons with the primary intent of improving language skills, tracks the story of Kibomi, a 12-year-old boy from a war-torn African nation searching for his sister after their parents are killed. In one chapter, reading comprehension questions are followed by some thought experiments: “What would you think and do in the following situations in order not to become bitter?” Scenarios include the sudden death of a friend, receiving a scolding from a teacher, being a victim of racial, religious, or other discrimination, and a parent losing their job. While contemporary societies “wish to extend childhood,” the book’s introduction states, “among the generality of humankind, living under precarious conditions, a person is, by the age of 15, already shouldering weighty responsibilities.”

Warner’s book tends to agree. She provides a brief history of American adolescence, beginning with the assertion that life in early America was so difficult, girls typically did not reach menarche until they were 17. It was not, she contends, until the advent of child labor laws and compulsory schooling in the first half of the 20th century, which forced adolescents out of factories and apprenticeships and into each other’s company for most of the day in schools, that anxieties about cliquishness and social standing became commonplace. In Warner’s telling, our Americentric worldview means we think of middle school as something Hobbesian and competitive, but it has not been the case historically, nor is it the case globally. As she puts it, “biology loads the gun, environment pulls the trigger.”

Since the Baha’i religion believes in the unity of all humanity, and that all religions come from God, the Junior Youth Empowerment Program aims to provide a positive environment for young adolescents of all faith backgrounds. Litoff said that the program “is for all kids, based on Baha’i principles,” but is not exclusively for Baha’is, whose faith forbids them to proselytize. Taefi confirms that this is the case in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, where she lives and works. She said in an email there are about 150 kids in the Junior Youth program where she is, about 40 of whom are
Baha’i themselves. Since the groups are based on the neighborhoods in which its members live, she said there may only be one or two Baha’i youth in a given one. This isn’t a problem for Baha’is. “The Baha’i faith is the oneness of all religions and all backgrounds,” Taefi said, “So we welcome anyone who is interested in the community-building process.” Accordingly, much of the Junior Youth Empowerment Program is simply “Baha’i-inspired,” which according to the animator instruction book, means it “address[es] themes from a Baha’i perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction.”

I spoke on the phone with Arianna, a 12-year-old Baha’i in the Research Triangle area. She said the diversity of the Junior Youth program is part of its appeal for her. Speaking with poised eloquence, she describes her Junior Youth group’s recent food drive, in which they were able to donate 500 pounds of food to their local food bank in response to increased demand during the height of the pandemic. In her opinion, participation in the program is equipping her and her peers to better deal with the challenges of middle-school life, and beyond. “At this age we feel that, ‘Oh, we can do things ourselves,’” she said, “But you also see a lot of people saying, ‘Oh, they’re all still kids, they’re all young, they can’t really do anything.’ And I feel like the Junior Youth Empowerment Program does not say that we can’t do these things. Participation in the Junior Youth Empowerment Program sets her and her friends apart by giving them purpose: “I see different people in school—all they do, they go to school, come home, and just play video games. They don’t notice all these things going on around them, they don’t do really anything, other than that.”

Have the Baha’i’s cracked the code with the Junior Youth program, and its formula of intellectual and grassroots social engagement? If the priests and rabbis in the old joke could replicate it, would the metaphorical bats stick around after their bar mitzvahs and confirmations?

“It depends on each individual,” Taefi wrote in her email, “But for the most part, [Junior Youth participants] are more confident in their beliefs as their spiritual perception has strengthened, and they are able to recognize the positive and negative forces, and stand up for their beliefs.” In Taefi’s experience, this tends to be the case more with graduates who stay on to lead Junior Youth groups or Baha’i children’s classes themselves. “Many of the Baha’is who have been involved in the program tend to continue to stay Baha’is through their adulthood as they become heavily connected with service and community life,” she wrote. She believes this returning to teach and lead later in life is vital. When she was around 12, she said her family immigrated to the U.S. from Iran. “It was really exciting,” she said, “But it was at the same time really challenging, being in a new country, not knowing English, and I remember I was put in a regular class, and I didn’t know anything, and it was really difficult,” she said. “I had all these energies and all these excitement, and I just didn’t have anyone who can kind of help.” At that time, she explains, the Junior Youth program was still in its early stages of proliferation in the U.S., which she estimates was around 2010. Returning to work with middle schoolers has been crucial to her own spiritual journey after experiencing a period of alienation from her own faith at around 15 years old. The experience...
Joseph Hant was living a cultured and sophisticated life as a ski jumper and gymnast in Vienna in 1939, with his wife, Ghisela Ellen, and his son Bill, who was 4 at the time. For them, Austria was home. Even after the German annexation of their country the previous year, the idea of emigration didn’t come up for the Jewish family until a close contact in the Nazi party warned Hant that he had to get out. He lined up for days to buy tickets on two of the last ships headed for Shanghai and was finally able to send his family and parents in December 1939—aboard luxury ocean liners.

Hant was among almost 20,000 Jewish refugees who escaped the Holocaust and found refuge in Shanghai. Roughly two-thirds of these refugees came from Austria and Germany, and most others were from Eastern European countries. Survivors and historians have painted vivid portraits of Jewish life in the Shanghai ghetto—squalor, isolation, shortages of food and medicine—but few people know of the curious month-long journeys that carried tens of thousands of Holocaust refugees to the city in the first place, often in surprisingly swanky accommodations.

In September 1935, the Nazis announced the Reich Citizenship Law, which required that all German citizens have German “blood.” Jews and other ethnic minorities lost their right to vote or to travel, as well as their right to citizenship. Then, in March 1938, the Nazi annexation of Austria extended these same citizenship laws to the 192,000 Jews living in Austria at the time. Kristallnacht occurred just eight months later, and a tsunami of Jews fled the region, seeking refuge in any nation that would take them.

For Jews to be able to leave Germany or an annexed state, they had to show evidence that they would be let into another country, in the form of an official visa and a ticket for transportation. Most countries were unwilling to accept a significant number of refugees, and so the process for obtaining a valid visa was often rigorous and overly bureaucratic. The United States hosted the 1938 Evian Conference to convince other nations to increase their respective immigration quotas, but to no avail. No country other than the tiny Dominican Republic committed to upping its quota. Germany gleefully mocked the conference, remarking on how many countries criticized Germany’s treatment of Jews, but none were willing to take Jews in.

Then there was Shanghai. Shanghai was one of the only free ports that did not require a visa to enter at the time, because the Chinese government had little control over border enforcement. Western imperial forces had established the International Settlement and the French Concession as autonomous foreign areas under unequal treaties, keeping the port open even after the Japanese invasion in 1937. The city was a promising escape for another reason. Ho Feng-Shan, the Chinese consul-general in Vienna, issued thousands of visas to Jewish refugees so that they could cross the Austrian border with proper documentation. The extent of Ho’s rescue only came to light after his death in 1997, and he was posthumously recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 2000.

For German and Austrian Jews, the typical route to Shanghai formally began in Italy on board Italian or Japanese luxury cruise liners, passing through the Red Sea via the British-controlled Suez Canal, crossing the Indian and Pacific Oceans and docking in Shanghai by way of India, Singapore, and the Philippines. Around 2,000 Eastern European Jews, mostly Polish and Lithuanian, traveled via the Trans-Siberian train to Vladivostok, where they boarded similar ships to Shanghai via the port city of Dairen (known today as Dalian).

According to survivors’ accounts, the voyage east was a confoundingly luxurious experience. The cruise liners provided three sumptuous meals a day and filled the passengers’ schedule with grand performances and social events. Conte Verde, one of the cruise liners run by Italian shipping company Lloyd Triestino, was a 530-feet-long floating palace. It carried 643 modish cabins, lavishly decorated restaurants and salons, a sun deck, and an outdoor swimming pool. First-class cabins were adorned with sapphire blue carpets, hazelnut furniture sets, and hot water bathtubs. But the 24-day stay came at a steep cost. Many refugees had no choice but to buy first-class tickets due to the high demand. Lloyd Triestino liners like Conte Verde carried more than half of the soon-to-be Shanghai Jews out of Europe, departing from Genoa and Trieste.

Life on the ship was a drastic shift from the turmoil in the distance. Lisbeth Loewenberg, an Austrian refugee who was a teenager traveling with her mother, provided a testimony in the book Exodus to Shanghai: “You could barely get any food in Vienna anymore, and Jews didn’t get anything. All of a sudden, you were on the ship and you had three meals a day served to you in the dining room of the ship. For me it was a fantastic experience.” Loewenberg witnessed two young men playing the piano and singing pop songs: “I said to my mother, ‘How is it possible that people when they come out from the concentration camp are able to enjoy themselves and sing and be so happy? It
seems like a contradiction to me.’ And my mother said, ‘Well, it’s because they came out of the concentration camp that they are happy.’

Through the eyes of a child, it may have seemed like a grand adventure. But for adults, there were compounding fears, one of which involved money. The Nazis collected large immigration taxes and heavily restricted the amount of cash and assets the refugees could bring with them. Many refugees, including Joseph Hant, left with almost nothing to their names. However, they were allowed to wire some money to the shipping company to be used for goods and services on the cruise liner. From that restriction, a buoyant little economy was born. Luxury goods and services were available to passengers who could afford them, from high-end cigars to onboard gambling. And cash flow worked both ways. The talented 16-year-old refugee Gérard Kohbieter earned money by performing magic tricks around the ship. Passengers also bought expensive souvenirs from the gift shops in the hopes of reselling them for cash in Shanghai.

At its peak, Lloyd Triestino cruise liners, along with Japanese, German, French, and Dutch ships, transported over 1,000 refugees to Shanghai monthly. The voyage was a bubble suspended in the middle of the ocean, briefly sheltering the refugees from the trauma behind and the challenges ahead. In August 1939, the Japanese military authority announced a decree to refuse Jewish refugees, which was soon followed by the Shanghai Municipal Council, the autonomous foreign governing body of the International Settlement. From then on, refugees had to apply for a permit of entry. Ships continued to come in until Italy and Japan joined the Axis powers and the Suez Canal route was cut off. In December 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan blocked any new entrance of Jews into Shanghai.

Under the Nazi allies’ pressure, the Japanese military began consolidating the stateless refugees into what became known as the Shanghai ghetto in 1943. Around 18,000 Jews were forced into a segregated area of less than 1 square mile in the Hongkou district. Disembarking from heavenly cruise liners, these former middle-class urbanites were dumped into 10-person rooms where they would face unemployment, starvation, and sickness. The refugees had to apply for daily passes at the Japanese police station to leave the ghetto for school or business, which was an arduous endeavor. Joseph Hant was able to establish an electronics shop in the ghetto, fixing radios for money. He welcomed customers from all backgrounds—the European Jews, the Chinese, and even the Japanese. He also joined the guards to patrol the area, along with Japanese soldiers. Survivors of the Shanghai ghetto remember the experience to be extremely dehumanizing, recounting abysmal hygiene conditions and lack of resources that caused 10% of the ghetto population to perish.

On Sept. 3, 1945, the Shanghai ghetto was liberated, freeing 15,000 Jews whom the Nazi-allied Japanese forces had cornered. After the war ended, most of the Shanghai refugees left before the new Chinese government was founded in 1949, and by 1958 only around 80 remained. Joseph Hant’s family moved to the U.S. in 1947, where his son Bill earned a Ph.D. from UCLA and became an engineer. At UCLA, Bill would tell his family’s story to visiting Chinese students who had never learned of the Shanghai ghetto.

The narrative of the stately oceanic passage jumps out from the bleakness of the Holocaust. It’s hard to ignore the parallel to the biblical Miriam’s Song of the Sea, sung by the Israelites upon crossing the Red Sea to refuge. With their enemies close behind them and a vast desert ahead of them, they allowed themselves a brief respite to rejoice. The song of the sea is the song that refugees played on the ship’s piano; the song that washed over a young Lisbeth Loewenberg who could not fathom how any joy could be felt amid such tragedy. These refugees had seen death and evaded it. And in the murky sea fog ahead, they saw glimpses of their own liberation.

This article was originally published on September 1, 2022
The Rise and Fall of Pushcarts

Once a central feature of immigrant life in urban America, these mobile markets were eventually shoved aside. But their descendants may be making a comeback.

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

By the 1960s, visitors to the Jewish Museum on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue had grown accustomed to seeing the latest in contemporary art as well as the most ancient of Jewish ceremonial objects in its galleries. But photographs of pushcarts? Talk about “matter out of place.”

Still, they oohed and aahed at images of the humble object, which had come to rest in the museum as part of Portal to America, a multimedia exhibition on the history of the Lower East Side. The younger members of the audience regarded the peripatetic contraption as if it were an ancient archaeological relic, which it might as well have been, so foreign had this 8-foot-long and 4-foot-wide amalgam of wood and metal come to be.

But for others, especially those who had once called an immigrant neighborhood their home, it wasn’t distance so much as proximity that accounted for the pushcart’s newfound appeal. A physical testament to how far America’s Jews had come, it bore witness to their upward mobility and, for good measure, to dramatic changes in the urban landscape.

The pushcart, an old world convention, was once a familiar presence within the immigrant enclaves of the nation’s urban populations. Chicago’s Maxwell Street was thick with them, as was New York of the early 1900s, where “pushcart men,” most of them clustered on the Lower East Side, numbered several thousand strong. Sometimes entire congregations of pushcarts converged on the same downtown street, rendering it an impromptu outdoor market.

Eventually, the pushcart all but vanished in postwar America, replaced by shiny supermarkets, whose capacious aisles contained a stunning assortment of neatly shelved goods. Its disappearance—some might even say its erasure—was bound up with growing affluence, new patterns of consumer behavior, heightened attentiveness to public health, and greater municipal control of the streets.

It’s a big story and a familiar one to those of us today who are mindful of the “not in my back yard” response to urban life. Then, as now, civic-minded, middle-class urban dwellers of the late 19th- and early 20th-century city didn’t take kindly to people, practices, or things that might upset their equipoise. Though few, if any, pushcarts were to be found in their handsome, tree-lined neighborhoods, its residents branded them all the same as a “menace,” or, worse still, as an “evil.” They held the portable market, and those who wheeled it around, responsible for spreading germs, “contaminating the atmosphere,” and congesting city streets. They also decried the noise it generated, the smells of “putrid vegetable matter” it gave off and the limits it posed on childrens’ “play space.”

The “vexatious” pushcart had to go. To that end, its detractors hoped that licensing each and every one might reduce their number. But that plan backfired. Not only did it not result in declining numbers; it augmented them, giving rise to a new business venture: the renting out of licenses for a fee, a practice akin to the taxi cab medallion.

An attempt was then made to limit it to 10 minutes the amount of time pushcart vendors could stand in one place before having to move on, even enlisting the police to keep time. That impractical scheme didn’t work, either: There were too many pushcarts to be monitored and besides, the police had much better, more pressing, things to do than nudge peddlers to get going. Madeshift at best, like the rickety pushcarts themselves, none of these initiatives sufficiently addressed the heart of the matter: The pushcart was too entrenched in the urban ethnic economy to be dislodged lock, stock, and barrel.

In fact, only a few outside observers of the time understood that the pushcart was far from the liability, much less the health hazard, it was made out to be. Those sensitive to the ecology of the immigrant experience recognized that the mobile outdoor market afforded the immigrant poor the perquisites of convenience, freshness, affordability, and, most especially perhaps, economic opportunity.

By carrying a wide array of items—foodstuffs, mainly, but also shoes, aprons, house dresses, trousers, garters, and household utensils and crockery—pushcarts put America’s bounty within easy reach of the immigrant poor. Their contents, observed a reporter for the Baltimore Sun, “would make a fairly complete and sizable department store.”

It also made for convenience, freeing from worry the mother who had to dash out for provisions, leaving her children to fend for themselves. “Right in front of her tenement,” observed David Blaustein, the sympathetic superintendent of the Educational Alliance, in 1902, “is the pushcart which will supply her with what she needs.” And in small, affordable quantities, too, whose price was negotiable rather than fixed. A rapid turnover of goods, fueled by an absence of places in which to store them, ensured a fresh supply and one that enabled consumers to purchase just a few bananas rather than the entire bunch.

That immigrants with little capital
Once it became increasingly clear that the pushcart was not going anywhere any time soon, the city’s growing cadre of reformers sought an “intelligent remedy” anchored in information rather than attitude. “No one knows what the facts really are,” observed the members of the City Club, urging Mayor George McClellan to form a citizens committee to get to the bottom of the “pushcart problem.”

He did, establishing in 1905 what turned out to be one of the most detailed and arguably one of the most sensitive municipal inquiries of the prewar era: the Mayor’s Push-Cart Commission, whose staff conducted a census of local peddlers, mapped and photographed their location, peered into the contents of their carts, and held hearings at which peddlers, their customers, and municipal authorities testified.

When published a year later, the findings of the Mayor’s Push-Cart Commission ran to well over 200 pages. Recognizing that New York was a “cosmopolitan” place, where “practices which would not be tolerated in one part of the city are necessary and desirable in others,” it sought to balance the needs of the “tenement house population” with those more concerned about congestion and sanitation. The solution: the regulation rather than the abolition of pushcarts. Said to be “simple, comprehensive, practical and fair,” its recommendations placed a curb on the number of pushcarts that might occupy a given street at any one time. They also enhanced the licensing system so that it would include a photograph of the licensee as well as the text of his permit in his native tongue, be it Yiddish, Italian or Greek, as well as in English.

Granted a temporary reprieve, pushcart peddlers continued to ply their trade well into the post-WW1 era. But the East Side Chamber of Commerce and other municipal interests had something else in mind. Their hearts (and pocketbooks) set on transforming the ghetto into the “East Side of Tomorrow,” they looked forward to widening the streets, razing many of its tenements, building middle-class housing, and, above all, removing the noisome pushcarts and planting them indoors, out of sight.

Their efforts, actively endorsed by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who declared “war” on the pushcarts, ultimately bore fruit with the debut of the First Avenue Municipal Market, in 1938, followed a year later by the Essex Street Municipal Market. Clean, well-lit, and well-regulated, a “modernistic” shelter from the elements, where vendors were expected to be courteous to their customers and to refrain from shouting and hawking, these indoor markets represented progress: Good riddance to Old World forms of commercial traffic.

By outlawing the use of pushcarts and insisting that street vendors rent a stall within the rose-colored brick walls of the Essex Street and other municipal indoor markets, La Guardia put his stamp on the modern metropolis. He also claimed credit for enhancing the standing of its once itinerant residents, declaring in a speech that “I found you pushcart peddlers ... I have made you merchants.” And just like that, declared The New York Times, the “century-old era of the East Side pushcart markets gave its last gasp.”

Chances are that outdoor peddling might have died a natural death, anyway. As more and more vendors became store proprietors or wholesalers, their ranks markedly declined, a process of declension hastened by their clientele’s migration to middle-class neighborhoods where shopping had become an indoor sport and pushcarts passé.

No sooner had itinerant peddlers become a vanishing breed than they came to be seen as quaint and endearing, the stuff of postcards—“wish you were here”—and other expressions of nostalgia rather than the objects of opprobrium. This unanticipated about-face puzzled The New York Times, prompting it in 1940 to wag its finger at those who now hungered for the seemingly good old days when people sat on stoops, hung their bedding out the window, and shopped on streets that “reeked.” It makes you wonder about “this thing that we call picturesque.”

Many, many years later, another startling about-face came to pass: the return of the outdoor market. No, not the city-sanctioned Greenmarkets that, ever since the 1970s, fill Union Square, among other places, several times a week, but improvised, jerry-built, 24-hour fruit and vegetable stands that now line the main thoroughfares of the Upper West Side and other middle-class neighborhoods.

A consequence of COVID-19, which rendered indoor shopping perilous while also pushing thousands, especially the city’s immigrant residents, out of work, these commercial ventures are as much a product of our time as the pushcart was of its time. They’re a reminder that, in the city that never sleeps, history doesn’t either.

This article was originally published on August 23, 2022.
French Cold Beet Soup
(aka Borscht)

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity/Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 pounds raw beets</td>
<td>(about 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 pound onions</td>
<td>(2 medium)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 cloves garlic, peeled and left whole</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tablespoon sugar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar</td>
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<tr>
<td>½ cup sour cream, crème fraîche, or good yogurt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 tablespoons fresh dill, chervil, or mint cut in chiffonade</td>
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PREPARATION

Step 1
Peel the beets and the onions. Cut them in chunks and toss them together in a large soup pot. Pour in about 2 quarts of water or enough to cover the vegetables by an inch or so.

Step 2
Add the garlic, sugar, salt, and freshly ground pepper to taste. Bring to a boil, skimming the surface of any impurities that rise. Lower the heat, cover, and simmer for about an hour or until the beets are cooked.

Step 3
When the soup cools, ladle the vegetables and some of their broth with the vinegar into a blender and purée until the consistency of a thick soup. Adjust the thickness and seasoning of the soup to your taste, adding the reserved beet broth if you want a thinner soup.

Step 4
Serve cold in soup bowls with a dollop of the sour cream, crème fraîche, or yogurt and a sprinkle of the dill, chervil, or mint.

Yield: 6-8 servings

Hundreds of recipes at tabletmag.com/recipes