The DSA Comes for Immigrant Landlords of Color

New York City’s cosplay Castros sentence a new generation of owners and tenants to socialist squalor

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

It was a week to Christmas, but Lincoln Eccles wasn’t feeling the Yuletide spirit. The boiler in the 14-unit building he owns in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights neighborhood had gone belly up a few months before, and supply chain issues were making it impossible to find a good replacement. It was getting cold in New York, so Eccles bought each of his tenants a space heater before shelling out a small fortune on heat pumps, a green solution he said he liked in large part because it was good for the environment. The investment meant he was now nearly $300,000 in debt. And New York, he said, was doing everything it could to drive him out of business.

“The politicians don’t care,” he told me, speaking from the icy, whitewashed boiler room where he’d spent hours a day these last few months. “They say, ‘Well, you’re a bad businessman.’ None of them operate property. If they did, and they were honest, they would talk about things differently.”

When we think of New York landlords, we think of the Trumps, the Kushners, the Helmsleys, big names and big egos whose bad behavior provides as much fodder to the front pages of tabloids as it does the business pages. But in a city that has long taken pride in being home to diverse enclaves of newcomers from all over, your landlord these days may be someone like Eccles, who moved to Brooklyn from Jamaica as an infant and whose family owes its break to his uncle Walter, who climbed his way up from fruit picker to owner of more than 100 multiunit properties.

Tweak a few dates and a few factoids, and the story of the Eccles family could easily be that of many American Jewish families, who arrived here fleeing poverty and adversity and worked their way into the American dream, one small piece of property at a time. Except now that dream is no longer available to a new generation of immigrants or first generation Americans, and, ironically, it is the progressive politicians most vocal about equity who are the bitterest foes of folks like Eccles.

In January, for example, Eccles contacted a state senator, Julia Salazar, to complain of a basic flaw in the system:
Landlords have to pay the city to remove any violation recorded in their buildings, even if they’ve already fixed the problem. Basically, he explained, this means he has to pay twice: once to address the problem—a leaky roof, say, or a busted pipe—and then again to wipe his record clean and avoid snowballing fines. For people like him who have little money to spare, Eccles wrote, the measure was onerous.

“You absolutely should have to pay to remove violations that you’re responsible for, Lincoln,” Salazar wrote weeks later. “That is the point. It’s a very small penalty to pay for the suffering you inflict on people who live in your janky building. Do your job instead of spending all day trolling us on Twitter.”

This sort of dismissive language should come as no surprise to anyone who has been following local New York City politics. A wave of progressive lawmakers—many of them, like Salazar, newcomers identified with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)—stormed into office with “decommodify housing” as one of their key slogans. In June of 2019, they radically overhauled New York’s rent regulations, making it virtually impossible for owners to raise rents on the approximately 1 million apartments covered by the law. It was a reversal of reforms that had been in place for the past two decades, and which gave small property owners like Eccles better opportunity to recoup the considerable investments required to run a building, opting instead for policies that repeatedly failed for the prior half-century.

These policies, Eccles said, leave him between a rock and a hard place. If he renovates his units, he stands to lose a fortune on each one, an investment he never saw return. If he doesn’t, the new tenant is likely to complain to the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the dreaded HPD, which means inspections, lawsuits, and a fortune in violations. So he keeps some units empty.

“I need about $1,000 just to cover basic costs, like water,” he said. “I have three where the rent is under that. Unless they change the law, they’re not rentable.”

Under New York’s new rules, regardless of how much money Eccles spends to get an apartment ready for tenants, he can’t add more than $89.29 to the monthly rent. “The lowball estimate on renovating one of my two-bedrooms,” he said, “was $88,000.” Add to that a surging increase in tax assessments, and you can see why, even before COVID, things were looking grim for Eccles.

“These past eight years,” he said, “my revenue increased 5.75%, and my taxes increased 100%. It made it extremely difficult for me to keep up with repairs, much less pay my property taxes. I can’t get more money because of rent stabilization. When COVID came, I wanted to be a good landlord, so I gave tenants concessions, but then the city came in and froze the concessions forever.

If I can’t cover my cost, it’s not going to work.”

It’s already failed, he said, with several members of his family, all of whom were forced to sell their businesses, often at a loss.

“My first memories are the home on Eastern Parkway my family now had to sell,” he said. “And then we saw it refinanced for $30 million. What these new rent laws did is constrict Black property owners, reduce their wealth, and make them an easy pickoff for a bigger speculative owner. My aunt sold a 20-unit building because she couldn’t afford to keep it up any more, and a few years later the new buyers sold a single unit in that building for the price they paid for the entire building.”

Sharon Redhead tells a very similar story. The daughter of Caribbean immigrants who got some help from their Jewish landlords and were able to afford first one building, then a second and a third, she now owns and runs a 19-unit apartment building in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

“It’s become too arduous,” she said. “When my father purchased the building, these units were rent stabilized, but our increases were more or less in line with what our expenses were. We now have increases that don’t cover the cost of running the building. The loss has become just punitive.”

And New York’s lawmakers, she said, are “more focused on punishing owners”...
than on helping struggling small business owners like her stay afloat. “We’re supposedly greedy and bad, but yet no one is moving out of our buildings,” she said. “I have vacancies I closed the door on; I’m an accountant by profession, it doesn’t pay for us to spend $40,000 renovating the apartment and then get a rent of $1,000 if we’re lucky.” She finds the sight of empty units in her building particularly heartbreaking, she said, because she used to rent them to immigrants, including many who were undocumented and therefore considered high-risk tenants. “I wanted to help our own,” she said, “just as my family of immigrants have always done. That’s why we have these cultural ethnic enclaves in New York. But no more.”

Jan Lee concurs. His grandfather came from China in the 1870s, still wearing the queue hairstyle made mandatory for males by the Qing dynasty. He worked for a Chinese trading company, and when his bosses returned home to celebrate the Lunar New Year and left him temporarily in charge, he took the initiative to buy the building on Mott Street that housed the company’s storefront on its behalf. The decision angered his superiors, who had no intention of settling in America, so Lee’s grandfather took out his own loan and transferred the deed to his name. He kicked his old bosses out, and used his small building to grow his own business and his family. Lee’s father was born in that building, as was Lee himself. Like his grandfather, he is immensely proud of his property, and became a carpenter in part so that he could make all the necessary repairs.

“Ours,” he said over vegetarian dumplings and hot and sour soup at the restaurant in the ground floor of his building, “is the last generation of ethnic owners. All of the people who settled here in Chinatown did this on their own, because a lot of people back then wouldn’t lend money to Chinese. And now these politicians are coming in and saying, ‘Enough of immigrants being able to establish themselves here, enough of you guys and your American dream. We’re going to homogenize everything, control everything, while having no idea about the mathematics it takes to run these buildings.’ All of the uniqueness in our neighborhoods has been formed on the backs of people making sacrifices from generation to generation, and supplying housing and businesses significant to that group. They’re killing that.”

Lee, Eccles, Redhead, and dozens of others in their predicament, many of them minorities, are members of SPONY, Small Property Owners of New York, an organization dedicated to scaling back what they claim are draconian measures leading them to ruin. According to the group’s members, they’ve held more than 110 meetings with local politicians since the pandemic started, opening their books and begging for help. But the young revolutionaries that now run New York aren’t impressed.

“They don’t believe in private property,” said Joanna Wong, another SPONY member and a landlord. “They told us flat out. When we asked what is our role in your vision, they said, literally, you have a role, for now, until we figure out how we can take it from you.”

She wasn’t exaggerating: A source close to SPONY shared with me a recording of a Zoom meeting the group held with New York state Sen. Jabari Brisport recently. Brisport, a graduate of the Yale School of Drama, is a member of the DSA who was endorsed by prominent figures like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Sen. Bernie Sanders, and Cynthia Nixon. He prides himself as the first openly gay African American elected to New York’s state legislature. But when he met with Eccles, Lee, and their colleagues, he insisted that only the state should own and rent houses, and that whatever failures public housing projects have had in the past can be solved by infusing the system with more tax-based cash.

“So you don’t think that the housing market should be in the hands of private landlords,” one SPONY member asked, “is that a fair statement?”

Brisport didn’t need much time before responding. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s fair, it’s clear that the market cannot make affordable housing.”

These meetings, Lee said, left him and others feeling as if “the ultimate goal is to take our private property away.” A coalition of NYC landlords and trade organizations are making the same argument—that unreasonably strict rent regulations make it impossible for them to own and operate their properties, a move tantamount to unlawful seizure—in a lawsuit awaiting a decision this month by the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

One former Democratic member of New York’s state legislature, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is still active in his party, said that radicals like Brisport are a major liability. “These people live in a fantasy land,” he said, “and those Democrats who are rational are allowing themselves to be held hostage. They’re so scared of the primaries that they’re falling to do what’s right by the people of New York.” Requests for comments from Sens. Salazar and Brisport went unanswered.

But there’s one other thing that bothers some of SPONY’s members about the radical leftists on the legislature. “They talk a lot about ‘white landlords,’” said Lee, “but it’s not hard to figure out that they’re actually talking about Jews. You hear a lot about ‘these people’ and coded language like that.”

This, Lee said, offends him, not only because it reeks of bigotry, but also because he considers the Jewish community a model for other ethnic minorities to emulate. “They came here with nothing,” he said, pointing at buildings that were once teeming with new arrivals from the shtetls, “worked hard, bought buildings, moved on up. The Chinese did the same thing, and when no one else in town would sell to my grandfather, it was a Jewish architect who did. Now the same people who don’t seem to like Jews don’t seem to like the idea of other ethnic communities getting ahead in exactly the same way. This is how you kill New York.”

HISTORY
Tablet explores the past at tabletmag.com/sections/history

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The Fate of Putin’s Jewish Oligarchs

Their extreme wealth and generous giving to Jewish causes speak to a precarious balancing act that the war in Ukraine may have permanently undone

BY ARMIN ROSEN

From the moment Russian troops began marching across the Ukrainian border, the United States and its allies sought a response that could match the severity of Vladimir Putin’s invasion without actually entering the conflict. To mirror the swiftness and shock of Putin’s invasion, Washington and Western European governments froze Russia’s access to 87% of its $630 billion in foreign reserves that aren’t held in Chinese yuan, and took over the assets of Russians accused of aiding Moscow’s war machine. The new measures appeared with disorienting speed. “Having been at the Treasury, [I know] it could take years to get to this level of economic sanctions,” former U.S. government sanctions official Ari Redbord recently told The Scroll, Tablet’s daily newsletter. “We are here in a week at what I described as ‘the nuclear option.’”

In the opening days of the war, Russian banks were booted off the SWIFT payment clearance system, while U.S. and EU-based energy companies fled their multi-billion-dollar projects in the country. European governments have been seizing yachts and real estate belonging to wealthy Russians. Less than a week into the war, Roman Abramovich, the billionaire Putin confidante and former Russian regional governor, announced that he would sell his thriving Chelsea soccer club, one of the most valuable sports franchises on Earth. A few days later, the U.K. froze his assets, immediately severing him from the world-famous $3 billion property.

That Abramovich was considered a mainstream enough member of the global business community to own a flagship Premier League franchise for over 18 years exposes many of the contradictions in the Western campaign against Putin. Despite well-documented wrongdoing—in Syria, Crimea, Georgia, and within his own borders—Putin’s regime was never thought of as being so horrible that Goldman Sachs, BP, and the German government couldn’t forge lucrative business ties with Moscow. FIFA might have suspended Russia from World Cup competition on Feb. 28, but soccer’s global governing body held the actual World Cup there in 2018, a few years after Putin’s annexation of Crimea and his rescue of Bashar Assad in Syria. It is impractical to level punishment against Western entities for their then-entirely legal business relationships with a regime that’s only now seen as uniquely evil: Exxon wasn’t violating any law in any country when it built up $4 billion in assets in Putin’s Russia. At the same time, responsibility for sustaining Putin’s regime clearly lies far beyond just the Russian individuals and institutions who were added to the sanctions list in the frantic days after the outbreak of the first European war in a generation.

Jewish communities face their own dilemma of how and whether to assess culpability for the Ukraine catastrophe, a problem embodied in Abramovich. The oligarch had reportedly made an 8-figure donation to Yad Vashem, which Israel’s official Holocaust memorial claims it never received; recipients of money that Abramovich donated as part of a 2019 match between Chelsea and the Robert Kraft-owned New England Revolution included the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Agency. Abramovich provided substantial funding for the Holocaust galleries at the Imperial War Museum in London, and launched a high-profile “Say No to Antisemitism” campaign through Chelsea that partnered with the World Jewish Congress, among other organizations. In total, Abramovich has given an estimated half-billion dollars to Jewish causes. He also holds Israeli citizenship. But when his private jet landed at Ben-Gurion Airport on March 15, the trip proved revealingly brief—Abramovich was back in the air within a matter of hours, headed for Moscow. “I think he knows enough people here who can tell him if he’s not wanted,” says Ksenia Svetlova, a former member of the Knesset with the centrist Zionist Union and a current fellow at Mitvim, a Jerusalem-based foreign policy think tank.

Abramovich isn’t the only Russian Jewish oligarch to focus on Jewish causes. Mikhail Fridman, the founder of Alfa Bank, launched the Genesis Philanthropy Group, which is mostly aimed at supporting Russian-speaking Jews around the world, with his longtime business partners Petr Aven and German Khan. All three are under EU sanctions now, too. Earlier this week, they announced they would be stepping down from the Genesis Group’s board. Fridman, Aven, and Khan are also founders of the Genesis Prize, the so-called “Jewish Nobel” and a platform that once helped them set the terms for who and what should be valued in global Jewish life. Moshe Kantor, head of the European Jewish Congress, major funder of Holocaust and antisemitism-related programs around the world, and billionaire owner of one of Russia’s largest fertilizer companies, isn’t currently sanctioned, but is perceived as close enough to Putin to be an obvious target for the United States and the EU as the war drags on.

Russian oligarchs have become a part of the architecture of Jewish communal life, in the same way that they were accepted elements of the broader global economy until last month.
Israel’s pragmatically warm relationship with Russia—whose army is deployed throughout neighboring Syria and effectively controls Israel’s ability to strike at Iranian targets there—was similarly treated as noncontroversial, or at least as no worse than the German establishment’s widely tolerated closeness with Putin’s regime. Fairly or not, the rules have now changed. As the war escalates, the choices facing Jewish organizations that receive money from wealthy Russian Jews, and who hope to reach Jews inside Russia itself, will only get more complicated. “A lot of major Jewish nonprofits have to really tread carefully over the next few weeks,” says Kalman Sporn, a Washington-based strategist who has been advising groups on their exposure to the new sanctions. “There is a lack of clarity.”

Thanks to Chelsea, Abramovich is the best known of the Jewish oligarchs who donate to Jewish causes, but Fridman, Aven, and Khan are perhaps even more deeply embedded in Jewish communal life around the world. “Fridman is more of a classic philanthropist in the sense that he really cares,” said one senior leader of a U.S. Jewish organization who wished to remain anonymous. “I think he’s the one of the three that cares the most” the source added, referring to Abramovich and Kantor.

In 2008, Fridman launched the Genesis Philanthropy Group as an umbrella organization for his work in the Jewish world. The organization has an office in New York, where its CEO is based, but is incorporated in the U.K. and Israel. The U.K. entity has only disclosed donations to a half-dozen groups in the United States, England, and Canada in 2019 and 2020, with the top grantee, London’s JW3 Jewish community center, getting about $600,000. This relatively sparse record implies that the grants to the organizations listed on the Genesis website, which includes groups like Hilennie International and Friends of the IDF, are being made from jurisdictions other than the U.K. or the United States. Genesis supported Moishe Houses in Russia and Ukraine, and funded Birthright trips for Russian-speaking students. In the United States, they have given grants to nonprofits like the Joint Distribution Committee, the group known for assisting Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants, and funded programs at PJ Library meant to reach Russian-speaking Jewish families in the United States. In Israel, Genesis launched the Our Common Destiny initiative aimed at uniting Jews around the world, an effort that received the endorsement of Reuven Rivlin, then Israel’s president. The group also announced it would provide $10 million in emergency assistance for Ukrainian Jews on March 3, just days after the invasion began.

In mid-March, the “leadership” section was removed from the front page of the group’s website, making it harder to find links to biographies of Fridman and Aven. Around that time, a staffer at the Washington, D.C.-based PR firm West End Strategy declined a request for comment on the Genesis Philanthropy Group’s behalf. In what is undoubtedly a harsh blow to Vladimir Putin’s war machine, the U.K. froze the charity’s bank accounts in that country on March 18.

Genesis isn’t really set up as a vehicle for Fridman or his partners to promote themselves or raise their profiles abroad. “The foundation is not the individual. If you get a grant from Genesis, you don’t interact with Fridman at all. You don’t even meet him,” said the U.S. Jewish organizational leader. It is indeed unclear what political clout one gets from funding Moishe House, although for some, this lack of public association between Fridman and Genesis might only prove the insidiousness of his style of influence-peddling. After all, as Genesis’ U.K. charitable disclosure documents note, the group does not raise its own funds, meaning it exists to spend Fridman, Aven, and Khan’s money. More generously, it is possible that the oligarchs’ concern for the world’s Jews has less to do with laundering their reputations than with a sincere desire to put their fortunes to good use.

Born in Lviv, in what is now western Ukraine, Fridman spent his student years in Moscow, giving him an early appreciation for the opportunities created by a faltering Soviet Union—he eventually set up an import-export house in Switzerland just before the collapse of communism. Alfa Bank, which Fridman co-founded with Aven and Khan, grew to become the largest Russian private bank that the government didn’t effectively control. In 2013, the Russian state company Rosneft paid $2 billion for Alfa’s 50% share in a large Russian oil company in the group’s portfolio, a transaction in which observers believe the government gave a 40%-60% premium—Rosneft paid BP, the owner of the other 50% of the same company, just $17 billion. Much of Fridman’s and Aven’s fortune comes from a suspicious overpayment that came straight from Putin’s regime, and it is legitimate to wonder what the Russian president might have expected or demanded in return.

A Russian anti-corruption activist working in the United States noted that Alfa had given loans to a major Russian military factory and was caught selling oil to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. “Can you imagine selling oil to Saddam Hussein and not being connected to Russian security services?” the source asked. But establishing Fridman’s culpability isn’t so straightforward. Anyone in business in Russia needed to reach an accommodation with Putin—wealth and power in Putin’s Russia flows from the presidency downward, and anyone with substantial amounts of money has no choice but to obey the Kremlin’s rules, at least if they want to remain in Russia (or stay out of prison, or worse). Again, this is a reality that western firms readily accepted as

“A lot of major Jewish nonprofits have to really tread carefully over the next few weeks.”
the price of doing business in Russia up until a month ago, and somewhat close to what they still accept as the price of access to the Chinese market. How blameworthy it might be for actual Russians to abide by those same parameters, within a country where their families and much of their wealth is physically located, is a highly subjective question.

It is also unclear whether any oligarch is in a position to change Putin’s mind on much of anything. The oligarchs do not act as a council of advisers, and they are not people whose opinion carries any special weight with Russia’s despotic president. It’s really the other way around: Their existence depends on whether Putin permits them to exist, and their safety is in danger if they stray too far outside the regime’s limits. This might be especially true of Fridman, Abramovich, and Aven, who were all rich men before Putin came to power, and who are not hardcore loyalists or straightforward apparatchiks the way a true believer like Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin is.

Edoardo Saravalle, a Columbia University law student who has worked on sanctions policy at the Center for a New American Security and on the Senate Banking Committee, says that the sanctions on individual oligarchs are likely a minor annoyance for the Kremlin compared to other penalties the United States and its allies have leveled, like the unprecedented western freeze-out of the Central Bank of Russia. “There’s a sense that it’s a way to get rid of a perceived hypocritism and kind of cleanse the system,” Saravalle says of targeting oligarchs—the democratic world wants to go after Putin without continuing to provide a safe haven for business figures who are viewed as being in his orbit. Seizing oligarchs’ property is also a “populist” move, Saravalle says, an unmistakable public action against Putin’s perceived henchman. But, he added, “I’d say the symbolism has also taken on a life of its own... In terms of what is likely to change the calculus, I don’t think seizing a yacht is going to do it, as opposed to being unable to pay one’s debt.”

If Russia defaults on its sovereign debt, as seems possible, it won’t be because Chelsea was taken away from Roman Abramovich. A default would happen because doing any kind of business with any Russian bank is now basically illegal across wide swaths of the globe.

EU regulators believe they’ve answered any sticky questions about whether the oligarchs are responsible for the war in Ukraine, and whether expropriating their wealth and shutting down their charities will actually make any difference. The Feb. 28 sanctions citation for Petr Aven calls him “one of Vladimir Putin’s closest oligarchs.” Meanwhile, Fridman “has been referred to as a top Russian financier and enabler of Putin’s inner circle.” Both businessmen are being punished for “support[ing] actions or policies which undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine,” though the notices do not go into any specifics. On March 1, Fridman said the war in Ukraine was a “tragedy” that “should stop.” Two days later, Genesis announced it had committed $10 million to helping Ukrainian Jews.

“Like so many around the world, we are heartbroken by the terrible events unfolding in Ukraine,” said Steve Rakitt, president of the Genesis Prize Foundation, when reached by email on March 8. “The recent events have no impact on The Genesis Prize Foundation. Our priorities remain unchanged and we are moving forward with our work as planned.”

There’s another, much less politically ambiguous side of Abramovich, Fridman, Aven, Khan, and Kantor’s Jewish engagement. Outside of Russia, the oligarchs could position themselves as well-meaning and even liberal-minded patrons of Jewish causes. Inside of Russia, they became instruments of Putin’s control over the country’s Jewish life, which was an extension of his method of running the country at large.

Prior to Putin’s ascension to the presidency in 2000, the leading Jewish organization in Russia was the Russian Jewish Congress, led by Vladimir Gushinsky and co-founded by Fridman. As Putin consolidated control, and as criticism of the Kremlin from Gushinsky’s outlets became less tolerated, Putin sidelined and then exiled Gushinsky through a trumped-up criminal investigation. At the same time, the Russian president incorporated more of Fridman’s Alfa Bank into his regime’s activities and boosted the alternative Federation of Jewish Communities, with the help of Roman Abramovich.

Both Abramovich and Fridman went on to provide substantial funding for the controversial, Russian government-associated memorial at Babyn Yar in Ukraine, site of the German massacre of Kyiv’s Jews during World War II. “Fridman is useful inside Russia for pushing an official line on secular Jewish life,” says the Russian anti-corruption activist. Similarly, Moshe Kantor, the fertilizer magnate, became the driving force behind the European Jewish Congress, a means of making the Russian government a factor in Jewish life in the rest of the continent. Fresh off of Gushinsky’s grim example, and faced with little alternative if they wanted to continue living and working in Russia, Jewish oligarchs whose safety and fortunes could evaporate at Putin’s whim proved willing to play their appointed role within the country’s autocratic system.

Abramovich’s, Fridman’s, and Aven’s careers in Jewish philanthropy speak to a careful balancing act, permanently undone by Putin’s war. For years, they protected themselves from Putin and remained accepted figures in the
international business world while demonstrating a greater interest in Jewish life than many of their non-Orthodox counterparts in the United States. It is likely their involvement in Jewish affairs wasn’t merely self-interested, and instead stemmed from their experiences as Jews living under a Soviet regime that had stigmatized their identity.

“They were outsiders growing up and the world reminded them they were Jewish,” says Leonard Petlakh, the Minsk-born executive director of JCC Brooklyn. Petlakh says the organization received small amounts of money from Genesis, perhaps a total of $15,000-$20,000, for a PJ Library-related program aimed at Russian-speaking Jewish families. Petlakh does not believe that a loss of Genesis funding, if it comes to that, would cut off so much money that it would significantly weaken any major New York-area Jewish organization. Still, Petlakh said in reference to super-wealthy Russia-based Jews, “we are lucky in the Jewish communal world that many of them have this elevated sense of their Jewish identity.”

Whether it is desirable or even possible to exclude Abramovich, Fridman, and Aven from Jewish life isn’t an easy question to answer, especially with hundreds of thousands of Jews still living in a suddenly impoverished and even more oppressive Russia, along with thousands of Russian-speaking Jews under threat from the war in Ukraine. From a spike in oil prices to the unprecedented and rapid halt in Western businesses and services in a country that was, until very recently, treated as a perfectly acceptable player in the global economy, the United States and its allies are already learning that sealing Russia off from the rest of the world isn’t simple or cost-free. Jewish organizations, and the communities they serve, are in for a similar round of unpleasant discoveries about what is and isn’t possible in this chaotic new world.

Israel is being forced to leave the new terrain in real time. Despite having the Russian military on its border, despite voting to condemn Putin’s invasion at the United Nations, and despite Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s mediation efforts between Russia and Ukraine, Israel has come in for a kind of criticism that other U.S. allies, like neutral India and South Africa, have somehow avoided. Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland recently warned Israel against becoming “a last haven for dirty money fueling Putin’s war,” and the United States has called for Israel to join the Western sanctions regime. Perhaps it’s even punished Israel for not joining so already: On March 16, an unnamed Biden administration official told The New York Times that an Iranian-backed militia strike near a U.S. Consulate in northern Iraq was in fact targeting a secret Israeli facility, potentially exposing an ally’s highly sensitive ongoing intelligence operation on foreign soil.

It is far from clear that it would make strategic sense for the Jewish state to fully join the United States in pressuring Russia, a move that would undermine Israel’s position as a potential peace broker. Svetlova, the former member of the Knesset, says that as a result of a sanctions regime that Israel hasn’t formally joined, ordinary Israelis with Russian citizenship—along with Israeli citizens living in Russia—have had their bank accounts in Israel frozen as Israeli financial institutions attempt to comply with the new and hastily made EU and U.S. rules. “If you’re some average Joe from Russia who decided to make aliyah now, you can’t withdraw your money right now,” she says.

The relationship between Israel and Russia has already been transformed, Svetlova explains, with Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid showing a “departure from the more traditional Israeli silence on things … the mere fact that Lapid uttered the words ‘denunciation of Russian violence’—this is something you could never imagine under Netanyahu.” But Israel is being pressured to go much further. Jerusalem and the global Jewish community might be surprised by how little goodwill they will get for shunning Roman Abramovich.

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Natan’s Hat

From Natan Sharansky’s Never Alone

Shortly after arriving in Israel, Avital had started living a fully traditional Jewish life. My movement toward traditional observance was slower. This gap in our outward observance began to fuel much speculation. Many couldn’t imagine how we would overcome our differences. What will happen first? the gossips snickered. Will Natan put on a kippah, or will Avital take off her head covering—and will they divorce? We didn’t feel endangered by our differences. How could variations in religious ritual prevent us from staying together when the KGB couldn’t tear us apart?

But, like crazed soccer fans, people were rooting for me to join their team and wear their uniform: stay bareheaded with the seculars, accept the simple black kippah of the ultra-Orthodox, or find the right mix of color, material, and size that would ally me with one slice or another of the religious Zionist community.

Irritated by all the leering at my bald head, I put on the green Israeli military cap, which had a flimsy brim in front. I got my first one from an American visiting Moscow, who gave it to me visiting Moscow, who gave it to me. For Forces (IDF) stopped producing such caps long ago. So the latest hats that look closest to the original say in the lining, “Made in China.”
THE REST

➔ Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly demonstrated that he’s a canny political actor, so why did he appear so wrong-footed in his virtual address to Israel’s Knesset on Sunday night, hectoring the Israeli lawmakers with Nazi analogies and counter-historical claims that Ukraine saved Jews from the Holocaust instead of appealing to the two nations’ common interests? 

Zelensky urged Israel to send more military support to Ukraine, including its Iron Dome missile defense system, and impose sanctions on Russia, a country with which Israel has to maintain good relations given that Russian forces in Syria now straddle its northern border. It may be the case, as some U.S. political insiders are speculating, that the real point of the speech was for the White House to use Zelensky as a messenger to warn Israel that if it doesn’t fall in line with U.S. priorities on the Iran deal and other strategic initiatives, then it risks being ostracized as a pariah state. That would explain why Zelensky wasted his time on impractical requests he knew he had no chance of getting—like the Iron Dome, which can’t simply be exported to Ukraine.

➔ To keep production lines humming during China’s latest COVID-19 surge, factories are requiring workers to eat, sleep, and labor in “closed loop systems.” China is seeing its highest COVID-19 case count in two years, and while much of the country is in lockdown, the factories that produce parts for Apple and Tesla have adopted feudalistic models to remain open. Not all factories can indenture their workers—there must be factory housing available—and therefore many smaller factories will likely close during this latest wave.

➔ Stat of the day: With crime rates rising and police morale at what seems like an all-time low in some cities, gun buyers are snatching up licenses at unprecedented rates. In Philadelphia last year, 70,789 people sought a license from the city to carry a gun. For the three years prior, that number topped out at 11,814 applicants, meaning a more than sixfold increase in gun applicants in just one year.

➔ Half a million mourners filled the streets of Tel Aviv on Sunday to grieve the loss of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, a preeminent leader of Israel’s religious Haredi community, who died on Friday at the age of 94. Called the “Prince of Torah” for his encyclopedic knowledge and daily devotion to learning—he spent up to 17 hours a day engaged in the study of Jewish texts—Rabbi Chaim was seen as a singular figure in the Haredi community, with visitors coming from across the world to consult him on matters of Jewish law, seek his blessing, and pay their respects.

➔ The congressional leaders tasked with overseeing payday lending reform have received a payoff. According to data from OpenSecrets, the payday loan industry has given $3.4 million in campaign donations to 67 of the 78 senators and representatives who sit on the two committees that oversee the loan industry: the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs and the House Committee on Financial Services. Payday loans are short-term, high-interest loans that use the borrower’s future paycheck as collateral. The industry is rife with predatory lenders who capitalize on the paycheck-to-paycheck precarity of the working poor, often by charging interest rates as high as 600%, which can tick up even higher when borrowers struggle to pay back their debt.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

According to a national poll commissioned by The New York Times, 84% of Americans believe it’s a problem that some of their fellow citizens refrain from expressing opinions in “everyday situations out of fear of retaliation or harsh criticism.” Majorsities of the young and old, Democrats and Republicans, and men and women agree that self-censorship is an important dilemma.

Included among that majority is the Times editorial board, which made the findings of the poll the centerpiece of an anodyne 2,500-word editorial last week that criticized both progressives who “refuse to acknowledge that cancel culture exists at all” and conservatives who promote “laws that would ban books, stifle teachers, and discourage open discussion in classrooms.” Only 5% of Americans in the national poll believe that the new wave of censoriousness sweeping the country is “not at all serious,” a small faction that, judging by the overheated reaction to the editorial, seems to consist almost exclusively of elite journalists. Usually, a fringe viewpoint mustering such negligible support merits little more than ridicule from the mainstream media. But when it comes to the minoritarian contention that the very existence of cancel culture is a hoax, that there is, contra the Times, no free speech crisis in the United States, it’s bleated loudly and widely by the people with the largest microphones.

—James Kirchick

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Invasion of the Fact-Checkers

Who are you going to believe, the Democratic Party’s new official-unofficial, public-private monopoly tech platform censorship brigade, or your misinformed, disinfomed eyes?

BY JACOB SIEGEL

In the past five years, a cadre of fact-checkers has marched through the institutions of journalism and installed itself in the U.S. media as a privatized, quasi-governmental regulatory agency. What’s wrong with facts, you say? Fueled by a panic over misinformation, the fact-checking industry is shifting the media’s primary obligation away from pursuing the truth and toward upholding vague notions of public safety, which it gets to define. In the course of this transformation, journalists are being turned into rent-a-cops whose job is to enforce an official consensus that is treated as a civic good by those who benefit from—and pay for—its protection.

At Meta—the parent company of Facebook and Instagram—content flagged as false or misleading gets downgraded in the platform’s algorithms so few people will see it. Google and Twitter have similar rules to bury posts. In reality, America’s new public-private “Ministry of Truth” mainly serves the interests of the tech platforms and Democratic Party operatives who underwrite and support the fact-checking enterprise. This, in turn, convinces large numbers of normal Americans that the officially sanctioned news product they receive is an ass-covering con job—an attitude that marks many millions of people as potentially dangerous vectors of misinformation, which justifies more censorship, further ratcheting up the public’s cynicism toward the press and the institutional powers it now openly serves. On and on it goes, the distrust and repression feeding off each other, the pressure building up until the system breaks down or explodes.

Has any story ever been more energetically fact-checked than Hunter Biden’s laptop? The news broke just weeks before the 2020 presidential election, and was so effectively buried by accusations of disinformation and social media bans that it became synonymous with the power of the new truth regulating bureaucracy. Shortly after the first reports of the laptop, The New York Times’ Kevin Roose modestly acknowledged the role that misinformation journalists like him had played in pressuring tech companies to take “more and faster action to prevent false or misleading information from spreading ... in order to prevent a repeat of 2016’s debacle.”

And it worked! Only it turns out, as The New York Times now acknowledges, that the original reporting silenced by the fact-checkers was accurate. What was it about again? Oh yes, the evidence of corrupt business dealings involving then-candidate Joe Biden, his family, and a Ukrainian energy company. A Times article from last week on an ongoing Justice Department investigation into Hunter Biden notes in passing that emails relevant to the investigation “were obtained by The New York Times from a cache of files that appears to have come from a laptop abandoned by Mr. Biden in a Delaware repair shop. The email and others in the cache were authenticated by people familiar with them and with the investigation.”

Here’s another recent incident that illustrates why some people might be wary of the fact-checking authorities’ claim that they are acting to protect the public. Last month, Instagram placed a warning label on an American human rights lawyer’s post blaming rising inflation in the United States on “corporate greed.” Certainly not! Independent fact-checkers duly found the statement was “missing context and could mislead people.” The warning linked to a fact-check in the French government-backed news outlet Agence France-Presse (AFP). On the authority of that single article, which quotes three American experts—a neoconservative think tank employee, a liberal think tank employee, and a university economics professor—the offending post was effectively disappeared.

You may wonder why Facebook’s designated fact-checker for a claim about inflation in the United States is a state-backed French agency, or who determines how many experts are required to issue a ruling—and what qualifications make one an “expert.” All fine questions to have asked five or six years ago when the planet-sized logical inconsistencies might still have been a liability. At this point, it’s like arguing that America’s tax laws don’t make sense. The industrial fact-checking complex is not a debate society or a branch of science pursuing the truth wherever it leads. It’s an institutional fixture with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding behind it, along with battalions of NGOs and formerly broke journalistic authorities who are more than happy to cash fat checks and proclaim that America’s ruling bureaucrats at the FDA, the CDC, the FBI, the CIA, the Fed—and the entire alphabet soup of government agencies—along with the ruling Democratic Party, are never wrong about anything, at least nothing important.

Which is not to say that the fact-checkers are inflexible. The opposite is true. A matter settled this month with a single link and a few hand-picked quotes in favor of Truthful Federal Bureaucrat X or Noble Ruling Party Flesh Puppet Y can easily be resettled a few months later with different links if the political winds shift, by revising the record of the
past without ever acknowledging errors of judgment or fact.

This exact scenario has played out dozens of times just in the two years since the pandemic started. Remember back in May 2020, when Donald Trump said he was “confident” vaccines would be available by the end of the year? NBC fact-checked that claim and determined that “experts say he needs a ‘miracle’ to be right.” That October, when Trump said a vaccine was imminent, an organization called Science Feedback, one of Facebook’s official fact-checking partners, declared that “widespread Covid-19 vaccination is not expected before mid-2021.” In reality, the vaccine rollout began two months later, in December 2020. Since then, the U.S. fact-checking complex has spent inordinate amounts of time and energy linking “Trump,” “Trump supporters,” “regions of the country that supported Donald Trump,” and, of course, the beloved “anti-vaxxers” as the cause of lower-than-hoped-for vaccine uptake, as the vaccine migrated from being a symbol of Trump’s clownish grandiosity and fibs to symbolizing the wisdom of his opponents, defenders of The Science.

Then there are those hard-to-miss moments when factual reports of obvious blunders are recontextualized as “mostly false” or “misleading,” in order to spare political officials and their patrons the trouble of defending their unpopular policies. In early February, the Washington Free Beacon reported that the Biden administration was “set to fund the distribution of crack pipes to drug addicts as part of its plan to advance ‘racial equity.’” The report was quickly seized on by conservative commentators and politicians who picked up on the fact that millions of Americans would see such a plan as, on its face, idiotic, and cartoonishly racist, and thus an embarrassment to the White House. In the old days, the revelation might have led to some lower-level bureaucrat stepping forward to fall on his or her sword, or at least admit blame. But times have changed, and now instead of managing public fallout from the gaffe, the advanced guard of the fact-checking bureau can issue official decrees that there never was a gaffe and any suggestions of one are misinformation, while erasing the evidence of contrary views.

Which is exactly what happened in the case of some bureaucrat’s brilliant plan to hand out free crack pipes to promote racial “equity.” Within days, the fact-checking lobby leaped into action to defend the honor of the White House. Snopes and PolitiFact both declared the Beacon’s reporting “mostly false,” while FactCheck.org referred to it as misinformation. The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, Reuters, Forbes, USA Today, and dozens of other members of the media’s fact-checking clusterfuck issued similar verdicts, backed by their brand names and by official-sounding pods at big-name universities.

What is striking here, aside from the level of unanimity, is that none of the fact-checkers disputed the assertion that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) grant included funding for “safe smoking kits” to be distributed to drug users. Rather, they simply echoed the government’s denial that crack pipes would be included in the kits—a denial made only after the Beacon article was published—and then seized on the fact that not all of the $30 million set aside for the grant would be used to purchase the kits, which the Beacon had never asserted, in order to claim that the entire story was false. In true Stalinoid fashion, Snopes added an editor’s note to its entry explaining that it had changed its rating from “Mostly False” to “Outdated” after HHS “stipulated that federal funding would not be used to include pipes in the safe smoking kits.” Translation: The Beacon’s reporting was essentially accurate all along, and labeling it false was a stalling tactic to buy time for the government to prepare a response that could then be retroactively applied to rewrite the past.

By putting an official stamp on obvious manipulations of language, the fact-checkers license false and misleading coverage by outlets that playact the quaint 20th-century practice of objective news reporting—calling balls and strikes—while also batting for Team Democrat. The convergence of fact-checking and Democratic Party priorities is not a matter of speculation. The Democratic National Committee calls for establishing a “political misinformation policy” and repeatedly cites the International Fact-Checking Network’s partnerships with tech companies as a model for the party’s national censorship policy.

Once the fact-checkers issued their professional verdicts, multiple articles appeared that slammed the Beacon’s report while affirming its central claims. The Chicago Tribune decried the “misleading ‘crack pipes’ uproar” in a piece that also acknowledged the “slender glass tube used to smoke crack cocaine and other drugs” are, in fact, “the key part of so-called safe smoking kits” distributed by local groups. But instead of drawing attention to the use of crack pipes for smoking crack—an uncomfortable association freighted with unsavory and potentially racist connotations—the article coaches readers to understand that the “slender tubes” are “an innocuous part of the arsenal” for harm reduction specialists. In its own article on the controversy, The New York Times acknowledged “some harm reduction programs do include sterile pipes—which are used for smoking methamphetamine and fentanyl as well as crack cocaine,” before declaring with utmost seriousness that “nonpartisan fact-checkers have debunked the claim”
that the Biden administration “intended to pay for distribution of pipes.”

The episode illuminates one of the central ironies of the boom in narrative regulators. Fact-checking trades on readers’ respect for older journalistic values like objectivity without acknowledging the role of the prestige media in deliberately undermining those values by implicating them in the continuance of racism, sexism, and other toxic big- otries. The result is a familiar yet peculiar double game: If an article points out that a network of bureaucratic and educational activists are inculcating the notion that math is racist, that claim is right-wing hysteria. But when a journalist determines that crack pipes are innocuous, that is fact-checking.

As far as the accusation of overt partisan- ship goes, the record of the new “fact-checkers” speaks for itself. During the 2020 election, “fact-checks” were repeatedly used as blunt weapons to neutralize information that was potentially damaging to Joe Biden—Hunter’s laptop being the most egregious example, but only one of many. During the Democratic primary campaign, Biden was routinely attacked for having contributed to mass incarceration with his 1994 crime bill. “That 1994 crime bill, it did contribute to mass incarceration in this country” then-presidential candidate Kamala Harris told reporters in 2019 when she was running against Biden. The following year, after Biden clinched his party’s nomination, an Instagram post by a left-wing Bernie Sanders supporter that accused him of contributing to mass incarceration was marked “False” with a label warning users: “Independent fact-checkers say this information has no basis in fact.”

Fact-checking didn’t originate as a partisan Democratic plot against reality, though. It became a necessary feature of the new journalistic industrial complex in order to inoculate large tech platforms from government regulato- ry pressure and the threat of “private” lawsuits from the NGO sector. In other words, it was a concession by tech companies to the not-so-subtle threat that if they didn’t start censoring themselves, they might get their windows—or their monopolies—broken by the state. In that framework, at least, fact-checking is just as potentially dangerous to Democrats under a Republican-controlled White House and Congress as it is to Republicans when Democrats rule Washington.

Yet in reality, when it comes to benefiting from state censorship, Democrats and Republicans are not created equal. Another driving force behind the growth of the fact-checking complex is the necessity of enforcing loyalty to progressive ideas that can’t survive on their own. Stripped of their specialized language and social and bureaucratic context, key articles of Progressive Church faith are repulsive to most ordinary voters, regardless of gender or race. That is true of the racialized approach to education that was just roundly rejected by San Francisco parents in recent school board elections. It is also true of calls to defund the police, to teach transgender ideology to kindergarteners, and of approaches to addiction that appear to promote continued drug use. Policies that Biden administration officials would have boasted about in front of an audience of academics and public health administrators sound different—meaning, crazy—to people who have not been socialized to accept professional class bullshit. That’s where the fact-checkers come in with their tin badges and unearned air of authority. They can declare that a story is not merely mistaken or overwrought but dangerously defective—because we, the fact-checkers, paid by the tech giants and NGOs that are in turn funded by a seemingly endless tide of dark money from billionaires who want to be woke, or at least buy a woke insurance policy, said so.

Politics aside, fact-checkers fill a gap in the American system of government, which increasingly and for at least several decades now has looked nothing like the system described in high school civics classrooms and textbooks. Because the U.S. state now routinely exercises its power through administrative decrees, rather than through laws passed by the elected representatives of the people, it must rely on subcontracted nonofficials to enforce compliance with its dictates. This method of governance relieves policy makers of any obligation to build broad majorities that support their ideas. Maybe it really is a good idea to distribute crack pipes to addicts because it will save lives, as advocates claim. But if they believed they had the truth on their side, we might expect to see the people who champion these policies arguing for their merits and convincing a coalition of voters to support them. Instead, we see the opposite: the naked use of power and coercion to stifle arguments by people who believe they have a mandate of heaven, and the truth is whatever they say it is.

The fact-checkers have proved to be crucial compliance officers for the state, filtering out troublesome information before it reaches the public, torturing “the facts” until they conform to officially sanctioned narratives, and smear- ing dissenters as dangers to the public or stooges of Vladimir Putin. That’s the information ecology we are living in, and as a reporter I can tell you it stinks.

Fact-checking dates to the early 20th century, when publications used it as an internal auditing procedure to ensure their work’s accuracy before it was published. This inward-facing quality control mechanism was both costly and time-consuming, but it gave publications that employed it an air of trustworthiness and prestige.

That all changed when the internet came along and ended the media’s control over news. The first of the modern fact-checking sites, Snopes, was started in 1994 as an early online community organized around urban myths. Fact-Check.org followed in 2003, and PolitiFact—now operated by the Poynter Institute—was established in 2007. This new breed of fact-checkers had a conflicted relationship with the internet. They recognized the immense power of a global information index to do real-time research and debunk false claims made by public officials. But at the same time, they saw the internet undermining the foundations of journalism’s authori- ty with the public while also destroying its business model.

The trend lines for journalism and fact-checking have been moving in opposite directions for three decades now. Between 1990 and 2017, daily and weekly newspapers lost more than a
quarter of a million jobs, over half of their workforce. The decline accelerated during the pandemic with at least 6,154 media workers laid off from the beginning of March 2020 through August 2021 and 128 news organizations shut down during the same period. As journalism collapses, it opens up a space for successor practices grouped under the banner of countering disinformation. In 2014, there were 44 fact-checking organizations in the United States, according to the Duke University Reporters’ Lab census. As of the June 2021 census, there were 341 “active fact-checking projects,” 51 more than in the previous year.

“Publishers hope fact-checking can become a revenue stream. Right now, it’s mostly Big Tech who is buying,” ran the headline of an article published last September by Harvard University’s Nieman Lab. In other words, the same internet platforms that have turned journalism into a hollow shell while incentivizing the hyperpolarized clickbait that cratered public trust in the media, and which happen to be major donors to the Democratic Party with an existential interest in pleasing the government, are also the benefactors of a new meta-journalism that places itself above mere reporting as the final arbiter of what is true, while benefiting from labor costs that are a fraction of what was spent in traditional newsrooms.

Today’s fact-checkers no longer have time to keep their own publications honest because they’re leading a crusade to hunt down and expose dangerous untruths everywhere else. An example from The New Yorker magazine, once justly famous for the care and quality of its in-house fact-checking department, illustrates the change. In 2018, Talia Lavin, a fact-checker at the magazine, used her personal Twitter account to falsely accuse a disabled U.S. Marine combat veteran working as a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent of having a Nazi tattoo because she mistook an insignia used by the unit he served with in Afghanistan for a fascist symbol. After deleting the tweet while criticizing ICE for exposing her error, Lavin resigned from The New Yorker. “I just feel like I made a small mistake and it’s destroyed my life,” she said at the time.

Hardly. Lavin’s mistake became a public audition that launched her career as a new-style “fact-checker” and “expert” on extremism. Weeks after leaving The New Yorker, she was hired by Media Matters as a “researcher on far-right extremism.” In less than a year she had signed a book deal.

What’s notable is that Lavin’s initial act was part of a far larger campaign in which people who think of themselves as left-wing activists and journalists execute White House national security directives. The Biden administration’s “National Strategy for Countering Domestic Extremism,” released last June, was one of many national security documents that called for expanding the government’s surveillance authorities and legal powers in what amounted to a new Patriot Act on steroids. The strategy calls for increasing social media monitoring and implementing new screening policies for government and law enforcement employees, which also happens to describe exactly what Lavin was doing.

The current American fact-checking apparatus was constructed to solve an unproved assertion: that a lack of government regulation over social media swung the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump. “The country’s most prominent fact-checkers fought a losing battle against the flood of fake news during the presidential campaign,” declared an article in Politico published shortly after the election. The article rested on the false premise that there existed at the time a recognized hierarchy of “prominent fact-checkers.” The reality was that in the earlier journalistic landscape, fact-checking was a job mostly reserved for recent college graduates whose apprenticeship in the journalistic trade involved making sure that busy reporters correctly reported the date of Moldova’s first democratic election after the fall of the Soviet Union. You can only marvel at the audacity of powerful NGOs planting stories in the press to foster an illusion about the power of fact-checkers that in short order created that very reality.

At first, Mark Zuckerberg resisted charges that social media policing, or the lack thereof, was responsible for the results of the 2016 election, saying it was “a pretty crazy idea” and that it was “extremely unlikely hoaxes changed the outcome.” But under pressure from leading Democrats including Hillary Clinton, a coordinated push from the party’s halo of nonprofits, and a coup from his own employees, who include some of the Democratic Party’s biggest donors, Zuckerberg buckled.

On Nov. 17, 2016, a new organization called the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) published an open letter to the beleaguered Facebook CEO. “We would be glad to engage with you about how your editors could spot and debunk fake claims,” the IFCN generously offered on behalf of the letter’s signatories, a group of 20 nominally independent fact-checking organizations grouped under its network. The following month, Facebook announced that the IFCN would be its main partner in a new fact-checking initiative that would vet information—all information—on the world’s largest and most influential social media platform. So who is the IFCN again?

The IFCN was launched in 2015 as a division of the Poynter Institute, a St. Petersburg, Florida-based media nonprofit that calls itself a “global leader in journalism” and has become a central hub in the sprawling counter-disinformation complex. Poynter’s funding comes from the triumvirate that undergirds the U.S. nonprofit sector: Silicon Valley tech companies, philanthropic organizations with political agendas, and the U.S. government. The nonprofit sector, as it’s euphemistically called, is an immense, labyrinthine engine of ideological and financial activism that was valued at almost $4 trillion in 2019, the overwhelming majority of which is dedicated to “progressive” causes. The
IFCN’s initial funding came from the U.S. State Department-backed National Endowment for Democracy, the Omidyar Network, Google, Facebook, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and George Soros’ Open Society Foundations.

With no formal membership, the IFCN acts as the high body for the dozens of fact-checking organizations grouped under its umbrella that have endorsed its code of principles. According to the organization’s website, its mission is “to bring together the growing community of fact-checkers around the world and advocates of factual information in the global fight against misinformation.”

The IFCN’s fact-checking operation offers something different to all of the various players who directly and indirectly shape its mission. For government officials, it provides a means to outsource both political messaging and the responsibilities of censorship. For technology companies, it’s a method of exercising control over their own regulators by putting them on the payroll. And for journalists, watching their industry collapse and their status erode as the public turns on them, its steady work in one of the media’s only remaining growth fields, as information regulators.

The consequences for anyone who resisted the new mandate were serious. Social media companies and newsrooms that did not get with the program and empower the brigades of truthy technocrats were accused of helping Russia, bringing fascism to America, supporting white supremacy, and worse.

Contrary to the preferred self-image of data scientists, neutrally officiating organizations across the world, overwhelmingly agree with each other is no surprise, since consensus is the point of their work. But in a closed network, error-based consensus can easily acquire the weight of legal regulation, with seeming unanimity serving as “proof” that opposing opinions are laughably ill-informed, or dangerous, or simply insane.

That’s just what happened when Google, Facebook, and Twitter, with the full weight of the "facts" behind them, collectively censored information about the “fringe" lab-leak conspiracy.

Then there are questions that more directly impact public health, like vaccine safety and masking. Last November, the BMJ, a British medical journal founded in 1840, published an article based on claims made by a whistleblower who had worked for Ventavia Research Group, while the company was contracted by Pfizer to assist in its COVID-19 vaccine trials. According to the BMJ report, the whistleblower, Brook Jackson, alleged that during the trials Ventavia had “falsified data, unblinded patients, employed inadequately trained vaccinators, and was slow to follow up on adverse events reported.” After a week of record traffic for the BMJ’s website, the magazine discovered that posts sharing the article on social media were being tagged with the familiar warning, “independent fact-checkers say this information could mislead people.”

Says who? The determination was made by Lead Stories, one of the partnered organizations in Facebook’s network that, in a data sample taken in January 2020, was responsible for half of all fact-checks that month on the social media platform. It doesn’t take a particularly close reading to see that while the BMJ’s original investigation is scrupulously put together with hard evidence and measured claims, the Lead Stories takedown is built on sloppy insinuation, sleights of hand, and an underlying credulity toward official sources. In its “fact-check,” Lead Stories draws attention to the fact that Jackson’s Twitter account “agreed with anti-vaccine activist and COVID misinformation-spreader Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s criticism of Sesame Street’s storyline in which Big Bird encourages kids to get a COVID-19 vaccine.” That’s just
the kind of ad hominem, hard to follow, logic-chopping argument that would get laughed out of the room at a high school debate camp but has become the final word on real matters of public health. Nor is any appeal of these decisions practically possible. When the BMJ’s editors appealed to Lead Stories to remove the “missing context” warning label it had placed on the original BMJ article, the fact-checking site’s editor, Alan Duke, denied any responsibility. “Sometimes Facebook’s messaging about the fact-checking labels can sound overly aggressive and scary,” Duke responded to the journal. “If you have an issue with their messaging you should indeed take it up with them as we are unable to change any of it.” The BMJ’s editors then turned to Facebook, where they were told: “Fact checkers are responsible for reviewing content and applying ratings, and this process is independent from Meta.” Is that clear enough for you? Kick rocks, sucker.

My point here is that the convergence of government power with fact-checking is neither a conspiracy nor an accident. A 2018 report from the Columbia Journalism Review offered “lessons for platform-publisher collaborations as Facebook and news outlets team to fight misinformation.” It also offered a warning:

“If Facebook creates entirely new, immensely powerful, and utterly private fact-checking partnerships with ostensibly public-spirited news organizations, it becomes virtually impossible to know in whose interests and according to which dynamics our public communication systems are operating.”

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COMMUNITY

The War Back Home

In Brooklyn’s Little Odessa, residents keep a close eye on what’s happening in Ukraine

BY SUZY WEISS

Dmitrii Sorokin, at left, gives a speech as people gather for a rally in support of Ukraine on the Brighton Beach Boardwalk in Brooklyn on March 6, 2022. Hundreds of people assembled in this Russian-American neighborhood to show support for Ukraine as the Russian invasion continues. Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

The boardwalk along Brighton Beach at the end of the B and Q subway lines is peaceful in the morning. There are the sounds of seagulls, snippets of conversations in Russian and Spanish, and the clinking of smooth plastic as old ladies divvy up Rummikub tiles from the corner table at the Garden of Joy Social Adult Day Care.

“Little Odessa” takes up a little more than half a square mile between Shore Parkway and the Atlantic Ocean in southern Brooklyn, but it claims citizens from 50 countries among its older-than-average 37,000 residents, many from post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine—hence its nickname. Geographically, Little Odessa is worlds away from the air raid sirens, bomb shelters, and ruin that plague Ukraine right now. But Brighton’s émigrés—many of whom still have families and friends back in Ukraine—are nonetheless angry and terrified by what they see in the news as the Russian invasion plays out in their hometowns.

The neighborhood’s main drag, awash in ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, and bakeries—plus a Walgreens, a Chase, and a Popeyes—is Brighton Beach Avenue, which intersects Brighton 1st Street (not to be confused with Brighton 1st Path, Lane, Place, or Road) then Brighton 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on. Maybe it’s a function of English being most people’s second language here, or a holdover from Soviet pragmatism, but the to-the-point street names mirror the to-the-point signs and store names around town, which mirror the to-the-pointness of the people.

One family-friendly hair salon’s name appears to be Men’s, Women’s, Children’s; a coffee shop at 231 Brighton Avenue is called Kaffeine 231. “No food stamps for hot food,” announces a large sign in a grocery store, which rebranded last week from Taste of Russia to International Food. Bobby Rakman, 51, the owner, who emigrated from Odessa (then part of the USSR) in 1972, told me, “We felt that the name Taste of Russia wasn’t appropriate for the time being.”

Khrystyna Vasylyshyn, 27, who works on the avenue at her mom’s clothing boutique, Exclusive Women’s Wear, has outfitted the mannequins in the store window according to the Ukrainian flag, with bright yellow and blue hats, bags, skirts, and blouses. She said that some people are turned off by the display, but it’s important for her to represent her country. “I don’t care if I lose business,” she said. When I asked her what she thinks will come next for her country, she replied: “Um, we’re going to kill as many Russians as we can, and then we’re going to win?”

Vasylyshyn moved here from Ivano-Frankivsk 10 years ago (she won a green card, she wanted to study biology) and her family still has a house in Ukraine, which they loaned to friends from Kharkiv when the war started. I asked her about the boycotts of Russian products (from vodka to mustard) and people like the conductor Valery Gergiev and the dancers from the Bolshoi Ballet. “It’s not something that I worry about,” she said. “My people are dying.
Every day kids are dying, how can I worry about ballet dancers?”

Vitaliy Isak, 49, who owns a liquor store a few doors down, is all for the boycotts. “I won’t order more vodka from them. No more Beluga, no more Russian Standard,” he told me while simultaneously applying for a credit card on his cellphone.

Some are even boycotting their own tongues. “I speak Russian and Ukrainian, but now, my heart tells me not to speak Russian,” said Dennis Pertsyk, 44, who lives in nearby Bensonhurst. He says that “the world turned upside down” when the war broke out. He hasn’t kept close contact with his brother, a painter who lives in the Ukrainian city of Poltava, for years but now checks in every morning since his brother’s been conscripted to the war. Sometimes, he goes to Facebook’s Messenger app to stare at the green dot that indicates that his brother is online, just to put himself at ease. “He tells me to stop worrying,” he said, “but I can’t help it.”

Many in Little Odessa find themselves conducting diplomatic relations with loved ones who don’t want to leave their homes in Ukraine, or can’t. Isak’s mother and brother are in Zakarpattia in the western part of the country, but as bombs get closer, he worries about what will happen since his brother is barred from leaving, and his mother is too old to travel alone.

“My male friends can’t leave, and their mothers and wives don’t want to leave without them,” said Vasylyshyn, who has encouraged friends to get out.

“I’m scared for my mother; she just won’t leave,” said Nadiia Shavaryn, 21, who has encouraged friends to get out. “Putin should drop dead,” commented one of Dima’s customers who overheard our conversation. Her companion said: “Ukraine will never be Russia. It’s a different country, a different people, a different mentality.”

That was the sentiment of most of the people I talked to, though they’d alternately bring up the MiG-29 fighter jets that Poland would lend to the Ukrainians, if only the U.S. would approve the transfer, and the Keystone XL Pipeline. “I blame Biden for this war, because since he blocked the oil from Canada, it made Putin stronger,” said Lifshits, going on to talk about the no-fly zone, and how Ukraine needs Israel’s Iron Dome technology to intercept missiles.

I grabbed lunch—khachapuri, a bread and cheese dish originally from Georgia, a country Putin occupied in 2008—at Euroasia Cafe, on Brighton 6th. There, three dudes (Kangol hats, beaded bracelets, bomber jackets) took an intermission from shots of brown liquor to smoke cigarettes, leaving their vapes behind on the table. Older women with parenthetical-shaped eyebrows penciled on their foreheads and velour vapes behind on the table. Older women with parenthetical-shaped eyebrows penciled on their foreheads and velour

My meal at Cafe Euroasia was $3.50, cheaper than the iced coffee I buy most mornings 25 minutes away in Park Slope. No one looked twice at the coats and wallets left behind by the men in the restaurant. Little Odessa is a place where grandsons carefully escort their grandmothers across the street, and where you still go to the grocery store to examine the meats and produce yourself instead of ordering it online. The CD, DVD, and record store is packed, and not with hipsters. For the most part, if someone spoke English, they were happy to talk with me, about Putin, and the right to Ukrainian sovereignty, and how the Ukrainian people won’t ever be Russians because they’ve known freedom, and because, they say, the truth is on their side.

The immigrants here have managed to recreate the specificity of their cultures without giving into the tribal ugliness that drove them out in the first place. Soups at Cafe Euroasia include lagman and shurba from Uzbekistan, kharcho from Georgia, okroshka and borsch from Russia, and chicken soup from bubbes in memoriam.

Before I hopped back on the train, I checked in with the avenue’s only war profiteer, Firouza Ruzehaji, 46, who’s been sewing the flags that adorn the windows of many of the stores along the avenue, from her tiny stall, Brighton Fabrics and Variety on Brighton
HISTORY

An Unsentimental Education

A child of the Holocaust becomes a man with no interest in resurrecting a long-lost past

BY ITZHAK GOLDBERG

I am a child of the Holocaust, but unlike many Jews of my generation I have no interest in digging up the past to resurrect the memory of family members who perished at the hands of the Nazis. To what end? To take time and trouble to search through the archives for long-buried documents and memorabilia requires a bedrock belief that the effort will yield happy memories of a vanished era. As the only son of orphaned parents, as someone who endured a singular, un speakably lonely childhood in Poland in the years immediately following World War Two, I have no such belief, and no such memories.

People may think such an attitude makes me a bad Jew. Or a bad citizen of Israel, as I am now. For decades, the wisdom has been that if we want to grasp the full horrors of the Holocaust, we need to show unquestioning reverence for the world that Hitler and his mass murderers wiped out. But this strikes me as an aspiration, a retrospective attempt to find some redemption in the worst of our recent history. It is not a reflection of the reality experienced by many of Hitler’s victims.

When I think back on my parents’ experience as targets of the Nazi extermination machine, or on my own experience as a Jewish boy in a Poland bereft of other Jews, what comes back above all is the fear.

When the Nazis invaded in 1939, my parents lost everything—their families, their possessions, their livelihoods, their mother. I think their father had to stay back and fight,” he said. “I took their number, and I’m going to try and find them work. I gave them food and some money, too.”

Rakhman, plus most of his employees, his customers, and his neighbors, all fled at some point, from somewhere, from different enemies, and as a result of different forces, to come to this new, reconstituted Odessa in Brooklyn. In that sense, Rakhman never really left Odessa at all. “My motherland is America now,” he said. “And even if you came here yesterday, it can be yours, too.”

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with suspicion and mounting hostility, the party had been his refuge and his inspiration. Once the Nazis arrived, it also became his means of survival. He was quite sure now—or so he insisted—that the party would protect us and provide us with the future we yearned for.

Wrocław at that time was suffering from a significant housing shortage, not only because of the destruction left by the war but also because of a massive influx of Poles uprooted from the east, the part of the country now absorbed into Ukraine and Belarus. The party decreed that no household in Wrocław should leave any room unused, and it sent inspectors around the city for spot checks. We were assigned a second-floor apartment in an old German building with lions’ heads carved above the entrance. It was comfortable but far from luxurious. Still, we knew that one of these inspectors could drop by at any time and order us to share our living space with perfect strangers—maybe even spies.

This was the knock on the door we were afraid of. My father’s status with the party guaranteed us nothing, not least because, as a Jew, he struggled to win the respect his position should have afforded him. My parents would tell me the story of the Nazi officer who had come to their apartment in Kraków and ordered them out. They implored me never to open the door to anyone. I had a contrarian nature (one of the reasons, no doubt, why they admonished me so regularly), but on this I never dared disobey.

Already, I was afraid of many things: of the bombed-out buildings near our house that were too dangerous to play in; of the large neighborhood Catholic church, where I knew I was not welcome; of the drunkards who sometimes slept in the gloomy entranceway to our building, inducing me to dash up the stairs with my heart in my throat every time.

All these things contributed to an unnerving sense of the world beyond my immediate family, a world that tolerated us at best but could discard us at a moment’s notice. I looked at the heavy wooden door to our apartment as a barricade as much as an entranceway.

In a basic sense, of course, the apartment was not ours. If anyone could be said to own it, it was probably some German family that lived there before. But, more importantly, we now lived in a world where property rights had lost much of their meaning. If anything, we were proud to have taken something from the Germans. Since they had killed my grandparents and my aunts, uprooted my parents, and sent my mother to Auschwitz, it seemed like the least we could do.

It was only decades later, after the fall of communism, after I had returned to Eastern Europe not as a Polish citizen but rather as a World Bank official dedicated to the region’s economic redevelopment, that I began to see the larger forces feeding these childhood feelings: how Stalin and Hitler had undermined rights of ownership across Europe in the furtherance of their expansionist ambitions and left a poisoned legacy that would last decades. Poland was the most brutal example of this, its borders and political character forced first one way and then the other at a cost of millions of lives, including nine-tenths of the prewar Jewish population.

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the communist governments of Eastern Europe crumbled one after the other, many Jews with family roots in the region felt a compulsion to rush back to the places where their ancestors had lived and suffered and died and, in many cases, to lay claim to property they believed to be rightfully theirs. I never had any interest in the latter—what was I going to claim? But, I will admit, not having yet thought through the historical implications, I was briefly tempted by the former.

I, too, went to Kraków, where my parents and other relatives had lived before the Nazis invaded. I, too, went to Chrzanów, the shtetl 30 miles northwest of Kraków where my mother and father had both been raised in a strict religious environment they longed to escape. And what did I find? That the people there had the same fear I’d had instilled in me as a child.

They, too, were afraid of a knock on the door.

“Do you know of the Sperlings?” I asked at one building in Kraków. This was the family of my mother Sofia’s cousin, Leon Sperling, whose parents had died in the camps. “Do you know the Korngolds?” I asked in Chrzanów, referring to my mother’s family. “Or the Goldbergs?”

“No, no,” people would say, their faces blank. “We never knew such people. There were never such people here.” I didn’t press the point. I hadn’t come to take anything from them. I had no interest in burdening them with misguided nostalgia for a lost world that hadn’t been mine in the first place.

My mother, I know, felt similarly. She retained some residual fondness for Kraków. But she had no nostalgia whatsoever for Chrzanów. She had spent her formative years there pushing her parents to let her leave and attend a secular school in the city, as she eventually did, so she could pursue an education and a career. None of these struggles seemed to matter now, not with her parents and all but one of her siblings gone.

My mother returned to Chrzanów at the end of the war to look up the maid who had been asked to safeguard my grandparents’ silver and other precious heirlooms. “I don’t want anything back,” my mother said. “Just give me a couple of spoons to remember my family by.”

The maid, astonished to see her still alive, gave her the spoons. After that my mother left and never set foot in the place again.

My Jewish identity was not forged through religion, because I grew up with none, but rather by how others perceived me. It was enough.

When the kids in Wrocław called me a Jew, it was to tell me I was not one of them. When my mother invoked my Jewishness, it was to make sure I’d never forget the hell she’d been through in Auschwitz. My calling in life, she said, was to take revenge on Hitler by proving I could do things that “subhumans” like us were not supposed to be able to do. I was to get up early, study hard, and focus on getting ahead. In this way, my identity was stamped on me as surely as the stamp on my mother’s arm.

If it weren’t for the isolation of our existence, I might have done more to
resist my mother’s never-ending exhortations. As it was, I had few friends and was content to attend to my books and the current affairs that we all followed assiduously. If my attention wavered, my mother was always ready with an admonition to do better. She held Auschwitz over me like a cudgel, rarely giving me details of what she had endured but still burdening me with the symbolic weight of her experiences. It was the only way she could make sense of the fact that she’d survived when so many others had perished.

Her determination dictated everything. I was a child conceived against the advice of her doctors and carried to term despite a plethora of health problems, including several herniated disks that she suffered as a result of the beatings she’d taken in the camps. Now that I was in the world, I had to succeed at all costs.

I rebelled, of course. My mother’s love often felt stifling to me, and on many occasions I took pleasure in doing the opposite of what she expected, knowing it would drive her to distraction. One time, I sneaked into the bathroom and grabbed my father’s precious party certificate, which he wore around his neck for safekeeping and removed only when he was shaving, and threw it into a bowl of soapy shaving water.

Another time, I slipped out of the house to buy myself ice cream, even though I was not allowed to go out unsupervised and was warned over and over that ice cream could give me a cold. When, in response, my mother cut off my pocket money, I sat on the steps of our building and offered my watch for sale instead. It wasn’t long before a young passerby lifted the watch from my pocket and urged me never to discuss politics outside the house.

My parents used to tell me that the reason they’d been separated during the war was because my father was abducted by the Red Army somewhere in eastern Poland and force-marched to a large military encampment in the Urals to serve the Soviet war machine against his will. Recently, though, I’ve concluded with some reluctance that this story is not true.

A more likely scenario is that my father was selected as one of a number of Polish party members seen as potential postwar leaders once the Nazis were defeated. By working to support the Soviet military, he could demonstrate his Stalinist bona fides and guarantee himself a career on his return to Poland in 1945. That, at least, is what my mother told her cousins Leon and Helen Sperling. And the Sperlings, who emigrated to America after making their own escape from the Nazis, revealed it to me decades later, in 1990, when we met up in New York. My father chose to go to Russia, the Sperlings told me, even knowing that he could not bring my mother with him. My parents made up the story about the abduction, disturbing as it was, because it was more palatable than telling me that he had looked out for himself and left her behind. Given how much my mother had suffered after their separation, they worried that I might never forgive him.

The Sperlings’ account certainly explained why my parents had always been so evasive about the details of the story. And it made sense of something else that had bothered me: why my mother often expressed great bitterness about the relative comfort in which my father had lived as a military supplies and logistics officer. “You had a deluxe war,” she would say. “You were warm. They kept a place near the stove for you.”

“Over and over my parents reminded me that we did not live in a free society and urged me never to discuss politics outside the house.”
The tension between them on this point was considerable, only under-scoring the fact that while my father was a committed communist, my moth-er never believed in the cause. She identified, rather, as a Zionist. Under other circumstances, she might have heeded her brother Efraim’s calls to emigrate to Palestine as quickly as possible. Efraim urged her many times, in fact, to leave my father and stick with him instead. But she would not. She wanted a child, and after seeing how the Nazis had bro-ken up so many Jewish families, she was not about to break up another one.

My father might have been a true be-liever, but he wasn’t entirely comfort-able being identified with the Stalinist wing of the party. On more than one occasion, he let slip that he would have much preferred Trotsky as Soviet leader. Still, he understood the hard realities of a world in which individuals are not afforded the luxury of personal opinions. Those who had not proved their “Muscovite” bona fides during the war, including the popular Polish postwar leader Wladislaw Gomulka, had been purged, whereas he had a career and a chance to be part of the socialist utopia he’d always dreamed of building. It was a trade-off he was more than willing to make.

He knew, of course, that the world we moved in remained deeply uncertain. He knew about the pogroms directed against Polish Jews returning home from the war, and about the wild tales that Jews were abducting and ritually murdering children. But he thought of such disturbing developments as “childhood illnesses” of the postwar world, mere bumps along the road to what he saw as a perfectible future.

My father’s extreme dedication to the socialist idea made him incorruptible—to a fault. As far as I know, he never took a bribe, despite the pitifully low salary he brought home, and never took ad-vantage of his position as a food supply coordinator to spare us endless queuing for bread and other basic necessities. I have vivid memories of my mother be-rating him night after night about the many hours she had spent waiting in line, with little or nothing to show for it. Why would he not let us seek things out on the black market, where they could be found? “I’m a party official, and a Jewish official at that,” my father would tell her. “What will people say?”

In time, my father was promoted, but this proved to be a mixed blessing because it heightened his visibility and therefore his vulnerability. He had an of-ficial car and a driver now, and we had to presume that the driver’s job was to spy on us as much as it was to ferry us around. No more talk of Eisenhower, my mother would insist. I was to say nothing at all, even if the driver asked me a question or offered me a gift.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, my fa-ther’s position became much more fraught because the Stalinists were now without their protector. Hostility toward Jews was on the rise, too. One night, as my father was walking home, he was assaulted by antisemitic thugs who broke his jaw and knocked out several teeth. He sought to explain this away, once again, as the birth pangs of a new world. But my mother was no longer buying it, if she ever had.

Efraim and his family were in Isra-el now and kept asking when we were going to join them. Gomulka, soon to be reinstated as party leader, had no fondness for Jews, having previously accused them of “national nihilism” and arguing that they had no place in the leadership. How could this end well? Schloime doesn’t deserve you, Efraim would tell my mother from the Middle East. You have suffered, and he doesn’t even know what that is. He’d rather stay with the antisemites than come here.

After my father walked into the house with blood pouring out of his mouth, my mother patched him up and called the doctor and arranged for him to have gold teeth inserted in place of the ones he’d lost. But when my father offered more excuses for the thuggishness of his party comrades, she no longer pretend-ed to agree with him. She just laughed.

The event that shattered my father’s beautiful dream more than any other was Khrushchev’s infamous denuncia-tion of Stalin in February 1956. Word of the so-called “secret speech” spread quickly across the Eastern bloc and so shocked the leader of the Polish party, Boleslaw Bierut, that he dropped dead of a heart attack a few days after he re ceived the news. I remember a group of my father’s friends convening in our liv ing room to absorb the realization that de-Stalinization was now in full swing and they could expect to be its targets. Instead of keeping up their usual ani-mated conversation over biscuits and strong Russian tea, they sat in a state of absolute dejection, their faces creased with shock. It was like a funeral.

For months, my father couldn’t stop asking himself where the revolution had gone wrong. Had Lenin miscalcu-lated in thinking Russia was the place to start the communist revolution? Would Germany have been better? I, meanwhile, was barely 9 years old, and my overriding thought was to escape the increasingly claustrophobic atmos-phere in our household. What did I care if Stalin was a hero who had liberated the camps in time to save my mother, as my father always maintained, or if he was a tyrant, as his successor had said so unflatteringly?

What I really wanted was to be sent away to summer camp, and after lobby-ing my parents I was sent off to a place on the Baltic coast near Gdansk. I thought the experience would allow me to strike out on my own and establish some independence. But I was naive, as only a 9-year-old can be. I underestimat-ed how far politics can reach even into the life of a child.

The camp was stern and rigid and prized discipline above everything. We were not allowed to keep money or valuables with us—making it impossible to run away. Our letters home were rigor-ously supervised, which prevented us from giving anything close to an honest account of what we were experiencing.

At first, I welcomed the distance the camp put between me and my parents. But as a relatively sheltered only child, I was not remotely ready for the torments and humiliations of my fellow campers. When a teacher invited each of us to talk about our families, I volunteered in all innocence that I had relatives in Pales-tine. I may even have mentioned that my uncle’s family sent us packages of orange-es—a luxury most Poles could not enjoy. That very night, the retribution began.
“You Jews killed Christ,” the boys in my dormitory yelled, “and you’re going to pay for it today!”

In the melee that followed, a lamp came crashing down and the counselors came running, sparing me serious harm. But I was terrified. I had never previously experienced such deep, existential dread of what others could do to me solely because of who I was. Decades later, I learned—again, from the Spellings—that I’d come back from camp with a bad stutter. At the time, I erased it from my memory—along with just about everything that happened at the camp after that first night of torment.

Soon after I returned home, it became clear we were not going to stay in Poland. I was not privy to the conversations between my parents, so I don’t know if the deciding factor was the political dead-end facing my father, or my mother putting her foot down, or their alarm over what I’d been through. 1956 was a rough year all around. First the economy nosedived, then reformers took to the streets and clashed with the army and police. Then came the Suez crisis, which prompted the Polish media to tar Israel not only as a nation of Christ killers, but as an agent of Western imperialism too.

To me, as a child, all these jarring events blurred together. I thought about summer camp and the police state and the Catholic Church and simply hated all of them. Somewhere I had a notion that living under communism was the problem, but because of my father’s influence that thought was also at war with its opposite—that communism wasn’t perfect yet but soon would be. It was very confusing.

We left, finally, in May 1957. We took a train from Wroclaw to Krakow, the city of my parents’ greatest happiness, then a train from Krakow to the medieval city for myself. Then we traveled on to Szczecin, on the Baltic coast, took a ship to France and, over the next several days, made our way to the new life awaiting us in Israel.

We were terrible misfits at first. How could we not be? We were pale-skinned and wore odd clothes, and had to struggle with a new language and a culture we found shockingly different. Part of my father’s resistance to emigrating had stemmed from a belief that Palestine was a barren desert filled only with Zionist loafers.

Part of my father’s resistance to emigrating had stemmed from a belief that Palestine was a barren desert filled only with Zionist loafers. To some degree, we had all come to believe it. The Mediterranean sun, far from cheering us with its warmth, struck us as malevolent. My mother took one look at the Bedouin tents lining the road from Haifa, where we had disembarked, and exclaimed: “What kind of place have we come to? It’s Asia! They’re all Asians here!”

In many ways, we were fortunate. Efraim and his wife, Leika, were well established in the seaside city of Akko, 10 miles north of Haifa, and through them we were able to move into an apartment right away. Later, when it became apparent that my father’s background as a communist apparatchik made him unsuitable for most forms of employment, Leika helped my parents obtain a loan and a business license so they could set up a bookstore and small lending library on the ground floor of our building.

Still, we struggled. My father fell into a deep depression over the loss of his communist utopia. My mother recovered soon enough from the sight of so many unfamiliar faces, but she found herself caught between her husband and her brother, who continued to vent his disapproval at her marriage and didn’t hesitate to taunt my father in front of her. We told you so, Efraim would say. What did you think, Schloime? That those antisemites would take you as their leader?

My greatest challenge was that I was no good at the two street skills deemed indispensable for boys of my age, soccer and throwing stones. Most of my peers had emigrated to Israel when they were still toddlers and knew no other reality. They had no interest in my former life in Poland, or in anything else I had to offer. I didn’t want to be like them, either, so for the most part I stayed home, reading books and newspapers when I wasn’t doing my school work, just as I had in Poland for so many years.

Efraim did not approve of my solitary ways. He thought I should toughen up and stop reading in Polish, a language he associated with my father’s laughably discredited ideas. I was a Zionist now, he said, I needed to read in Hebrew. Whenever he came to our apartment, he would march into my room and try to take away my Polish-language books, which incensed me. On one occasion, he even tried to hit me. In response, I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a long knife to let him know I was not my father and wasn’t going to be intimidated into submission. The scene so stunned my mother that she fainted. Efraim, though, never laid a hand on me again.

My father was not so lucky. The three of us had a standing invitation to join a gathering of family and friends at Efraim’s house every Friday night, but the taunts that Efraim, Leika, and their brother-in-law Marian threw my father’s way did not let up over time. They laughed at him when his first job at a discount supermarket did not work out. They laughed at his consternation at free-market pricing and his struggle to understand how the same item could cost more at one store than at another. After my parents started their bookstore, Marian asked him how it felt to be a capitalist taking money away from the people. At some point, I couldn’t bear to witness this any longer. My father had come to Israel a broken man; he didn’t deserve it. I told my mother she should go to the Friday night gatherings alone.
Israel at that time offered no language in which to express the trauma of our past. People in the late 1950s and early 1960s didn’t talk about the Holocaust except in private, and even then only with others who had gone through similar experiences. Adults of my parents’ generation would sometimes ask for news of this person or that person—we’d hear ads on the radio asking for information about missing relatives—but there was no wholesale reckoning with the past, and certainly no national appeal to the memory of those that were lost, as would become commonplace decades later.

Israel was a pioneer society that prided itself on its young kibbutz workers fertilizing the parched land and its robust military that could take on all comers. It wanted to promote heroic images of itself as a dynamic young country, not dwell on Jewish suffering and wrap it self in the mantle of victimhood. Growing up, I’d be shocked to hear people referring to camp survivors as sabunim, heaps of soap. Identifying as a survivor was seen as an admission of a certain lack of toughness—an acknowledgement of how close you’d let the Nazis come to making you a literal bar of soap.

Our Sephardic neighbors, immigrants from Morocco and Yemen and Egypt, had no personal context in which to understand what we had gone through. And the kids who’d come from Eastern Europe didn’t want to know, and would have laughed at me if I’d tried telling them. My uncle Efraim’s exhortation to forget the past was typical. Our only job, as survivors, was to keep on living.

Still, the Holocaust remained an inescapable presence in my life. My mother blamed it for her insomnia, and since I suffered from the same condition I was made to understand that the trauma had somehow been passed on to me like an acquired gene. My mother would get up in the night, complaining that there was not enough air in Israel, and many times, I would get up too, especially if I had a test the next day and I knew I would have to answer to her if I didn’t ace it.

The friction with my mother was constant. She was quick to broadcast her pride in my achievements, but I didn’t want to be put on display like a trophy, just as I didn’t want to be defined by her sense of historical justice. From time to time we’d receive visits from fellow Auschwitz survivors, and the expectation was that I would treat such occasions with the respect they deserved. Once, though, I became so infuriated when my mother wouldn’t stop talking about my high scores in geography that I was rude both to her and to the Auschwitz survivor and walked out on the lunch. Another time, a younger woman who had been just a teenager in the camps gave me a long stare while my mother was in the kitchen preparing refreshments. “I wish I had a son like you,” she said.

This, too, unnerved me. How long would I have to go on being defined by other people’s suffering?

In an important way, of course, Israel offered us an ideal answer to the age-old problem of antisemitism, and on this my mother and I were in perfect agreement. Every year, we’d go to Haifa for the Independence Day parade, and my mother would thrill at the Air Force flyover and the overall spectacle of military strength. “A Jew is flying a plane!” she’d marvel. “A Jew is driving a tank! Is a Jewish boy really allowed on a tank?”

I spent my three years of military service at naval headquarters on Mount Carmel, just outside Haifa, and spent the Six-Day War bringing cables to the generals and colonels assembled inside the war room, a ringside seat to history that nobody else of my lowly rank was afforded. This period was a watershed for me, both politically and intellectually. I did not share the country’s general euphoria at the outcome of the war, because I worried about the long-term costs of occupying the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights. I don’t credit myself with any special insight on this; no less a figure than David Ben-Gurion was saying much the same thing at the time. Looking back, though, I see how much I owed to the intellectual training I’d received from my father.

He, too, thought the desire to acquire land as a chest-beating exercise in nationalist pride was the height of folly. We should have been offering reparations to the many Palestinians displaced at the time of Israel’s founding, just as the West German government was making payments to displaced Israelis of German origin. Instead, we were imposing military rule with its many moral abominations and corrupting what would turn out to be generations of young Israelis recruited to enforce it. “We will pay dearly for this,” my father said.

No doubt Efraim would have made fun of him for taking this position. My mother certainly didn’t agree; the way she saw it, Israel should do whatever was necessary for our security. But on this occasion my father also happened to be right.

Where I parted company with my father was on economic questions. This was my area of study, and under the influence, first, of Don Patinkin at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and, later, of Milton Friedman and his free-market disciples at the University of Chicago, I began to step away from the orthodoxy of the left-wing Zionists who had ruled Israel since its founding and became a critic of the country’s heavily subsidized state-run industries and farms. My professors on both sides of the Atlantic taught me how unsustainable the statist model was over the long term. Indeed, after Israel shifted to the right with the rise of Likud in 1977, many of these enterprises found it impossible to survive without the governmental support on which they had come to depend.

Just as I understood Israel to be the answer to the problem of antisemitism, I found free-market capitalism to be the answer to the problem of communism. This didn’t just put me at odds with my father. Where once I dreamed of a political career in Israel, I was now a decidedly odd duck in the Labor Party, my natural home, and an even worse fit for Likud because of my distaste for...
their positions on territorial and military issues.

I started my career instead as a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford. By the time I returned to Israel in the late 1970s, as chief economist for a potash mining conglomerate at the Dead Sea, my father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and it became increasingly difficult to share my ideas and insights with him. I much regret that he was unable to take in the remarkable events that rocked Eastern Europe throughout the 1980s, from the shipworkers’ strike in Gdansk in 1981 to the fall of the Berlin Wall. I can only guess what my father would have made of Gorbachev, of glasnost, or of the people-powered revolutions that swept away the old order. My guess is that, despite Gorbachev’s tremendous unpopularity in Russia, he would have been one of Gorb’s men, someone who believed in correcting an essentially well-intentioned system. And when that correction failed, he would have reacted with the same sadness and disillusion he experienced on learning about Khrushchev’s secret speech.

My own reaction to the revolutions of 1989 was different: I saw a unique opportunity to forge a different future for the region. Poland, the country of my birth, had been robbed over and over by political forces buffeting it on all sides, but now it had a chance to shape an altogether different destiny. I was an expert in economic development now. What could I do?

As it happened, I was spending a lot of time in the United States to fight my corner of an international trade dispute involving potash exports, and within a few months I’d pulled some strings and persuaded the World Bank to offer me a job. My destiny, apparently, was to go home.

I’ll admit, my first reaction to seeing Poland again was not kind. I took one look at the dilapidated buildings with their hangdog, depressive air, and all I wanted to do was gloat. We won, you lost. I’d been away for three decades, and the contrast with Israel’s economic development over the same period could not have been starker. One joke I overheard on my first trip in November 1990 stayed with me. If you want to know where the bathroom is, just follow the smell.

It didn’t take me long to find evidence of the antisemitism that had haunted my early childhood. At the time, the United States was putting together an international military coalition to eject Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and I asked a taxi driver what he thought of Poland joining the effort. “This is all the fault of the Jewish lobby in New York,” he said. “The Jews run the world, and it’s Polish blood that gets spilled.” When I reached my hotel, I told him: “I’m one of them.”

And slammed the door.

I realized soon enough that I’d been seeking out just such a reaction—something else I wasn’t especially proud of. The wounds of my past were still raw. Almost despite myself, I kept looking over my shoulder and wondering who on the street might be sizing me up as a Jew. Some part of me, perhaps, was thinking of my mother, who had reacted with near panic to the news that I was returning to Poland. She was afraid the secret police would be on to me because I’d never fulfilled my obligation to serve in the Polish military. I knew, of course, that as a World Bank official I was in no danger of being conscripted. It was incumbent on me to move past such feelings, and I soon did.

One of my jobs in Poland was to lead courses in market economics. The conversations I initiated with Polish business leaders were not all that different from the ones I’d had with my own father when he was first finding his feet in Israel. They, too, struggled with the concept of price differences. “I can understand competition between sellers,” one of my students said. “What I don’t understand is competition between buyers.”

Later, I spent six weeks in a struggling furniture factory in Poznan, two hours’ drive north of Wroclaw, where the absence of any mechanism to track expenses and receipts reminded me, once again, of how my father had run our family bookstore. He, too, never knew how much money he had or how much he was owed. If a book was not in stock, he would not hesitate to take a bus to Haifa to pick up a copy. “Are you crazy?” my mother would ask. “The trip itself costs money, not to mention the time.” To my father, these concerns were not nearly as important as the fact that a customer had asked for something and it was up to him to provide it.

The World Bank’s investment arm might have taken a 25% stake in the furniture factory, but I was far from a welcome figure when I arrived in Poznan. On the first day, the factory manager pointed to an enormous limousine he’d ordered for me. “We will take you to Auschwitz for two to three days,” he said. “I know you guys always want to go there.”

You guys. I recognized this right away as a test of my resolve, a way to see if I was just another Jewish Holocaust tourist they could keep occupied and out of the way. The reason I had come, I told the manager, was to help him run a viable business in the newly deregulated economy, and that was the only thing I intended to do. Once I’d convinced him of this, he became much more amenable.

As my job kept taking me back to Poland and to other parts of the former Soviet bloc, I continued to take advantage of my status as someone both familiar with the local culture and crucially removed from it. Nothing, it seems, gets people’s attention like a Polish Jew who says he understands communism.
In Russia, I overheard a factory manager whisper to one of his colleagues: “He’s one of us.” It was meant not as an expression of kinship, but rather as a warning that I wasn’t just another naïve Westerner. They needed to be careful around me.

Often, people would assume, perhaps half-jokingly, that I was still a full-blooded Pole, but this too was a less welcoming statement than first appeared. “I’m so happy that you and the rest of your guys are coming back,” one high-level Polish official with whom I became friendly liked to say. Again the expression, your guys.

I would tell him that I saw myself as Israeli, not Polish, but he was not deterred. “Never mind,” he’d say, “we will take you in whatever way you want to present yourself.”

The tone between us was light, but it was also clear that my friend was bothered by the Jewish question in some fundamental way. The whole country was. Poland’s role in World War Two was now a keen and fractious talking point, as I witnessed for myself at a book event in Warsaw when Jan Gross, a historian who had conducted extensive investigations of Polish crimes against Jews, both during World War Two and after, was shouted down by a rowdy gang of skinheads.

“For 800 years you were here,” my friend would go on, “and you were so happy you didn’t want to leave. You could have gone anywhere, but you didn’t. Then, because of some unpleasant events after the war, you don’t like us anymore. You even blame the Holocaust on us.”

It was a reading of the Jewish experience in Poland that no respectable historian would endorse. Was I supposed to be amused by this? Later, I learnedtorian would endorse. Was I supposed

But what, if anything, should be done about the past? It’s a question that continues to preoccupy and frighten many Poles, not least because of the insistence of many Israelis and American Jews that the Nazi terror was aided and abetted by ordinary Poles and that Poland therefore owes a debt of some kind to the international Jewish community. There is plentiful historical evidence of cooperation with the Nazis, of course, as the work of Jan Gross and others has illuminated. But I’ve always been struck by the tendency of Jews around the world to blame Poland for the Holocaust itself. No doubt this tendency has something to do with the fact that the West German government started paying reparations to victims of Nazism in the early 1950s, whereas Poland never had the financial means to consider such a move, let alone the motivation or the will. One country, in this mindset, has atoned, whereas the other has not.

To me, though, such a view is misguided, a conflation of multiple issues. Yes, Poland is still plagued with antisemitism. Children continue to be taught that Jews were responsible for killing Jesus, and the old conspiracy theories about Jewish world domination are still in circulation. Yes, antisemitism was ascendant in the run-up to World War Two and reemerged again as soon as the war was over. I know, because I experienced it myself. But let’s be clear: Poles did not organize or run the concentration camps and, in this respect, they have nothing to atone or pay for. The Nazis were their enemy, who subjected them to a brutal military occupation, targeted the intelligentsia and the top political leadership for annihilation, and put millions to work as slave laborers. The Nazis alone conceived of the Final Solution and constructed the terrible killing machine devoted to its fulfillment.

The rise of Poland’s right-wing populists, the Law and Justice party, owes much to the confusion that persists around these issues and the fear the party has managed to whip up to win and maintain power since 2015. It has issued repeated attacks on historians who identify wartime crimes against Jews, and it has passed a series of laws criminalizing anyone who accuses Poland of involvement in the Holocaust. Such measures have been widely condemned, and rightly so. But they did not appear in a vacuum. Too often, Israel has pointed to the vile populism of the ruling party as evidence of Poland’s historical responsibilities concerning the mistreatment of the Jews, thus conflating two separate issues and making a bad situation only worse.

To call this a sensitive subject is an understatement: I can’t raise it in Israel or with my Jewish friends in the United States without provoking an uproar. But Israeli government officials would do well to remember that Polish liberals in and out of parliament are as appalled at the antisemitism of the Law and Justice party as they are. Israel could be forging alliances with those liberal forces and offering them moral support. Instead, Israel is risking needless damage to its relations with Poland over the long term.

For many years I avoided returning to Wroclaw. I was afraid of stirring up unpleasant memories and afraid, too, that the few landmarks with meaning for me would be unrecognizable after decades of neglect. I finally made the trip in 2006 and was surprised at how moved I was to see everything again. The Catholic church, St. Maurice, was unchanged, and I took pleasure in popping my head inside, just because I could. The corner store still bore a sign saying FRYZJER, Polish for barber; this was where, more than half a century earlier, I had blurted out that I preferred Eisenhower to Stalin. Our building, at

SPORTS

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After decades of collecting recipes from around the Mediterranean, she comes back to her own kitchen in her new cookbook

BY LEAH KOENIG

For 60 years, food historian and cookbook author Claudia Roden built her career around leaving home. Whether she was traversing Morocco or Lebanon in pursuit of recipes, or joining an impromptu meal in the countryside of Sicily or Andalusia, she was perpetually on the go in pursuit of the next dish and story. Her travels led to some of the most celebrated and groundbreaking cookbooks of the modern era, including *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968), which almost single-handedly introduced home cooks in England and America to the region’s cuisine, and *The Book of Jewish Food* (1996), which broadened these same cooks’ notions of what Jewish food was and could be.

Roden is 85, and after a lifetime of adventure abroad, her newest cookbook feels distinctly like a homecoming. *Claudia Roden’s Mediterranean*, which was published in November, focuses for the first time on her own North London-based kitchen, and the dishes she most enjoys serving to friends and family. The book’s recipes—roasted chicken with red grapes and rosemary, a bracing lemon tart the color of dandelions, or a green olive, walnut, and pomegranate salad that I have made at least three times already—are dishes to linger over, clinking glasses and willing the waning sunlight to last just a little longer. The book’s dishes are also deeply meaningful to Roden, and the headnotes—the introductory texts that precede lists of ingredients and instructions—read like a memoir of a life exceptionally well lived. Readers learn about the time Roden interviewed Luciano Pavarotti for a British magazine about his favorite pasta dish (spaghetti with plum tomatoes, garlic, and basil). They hear about a “magical night” in Venice when she ate sautéed wild mushrooms over creamy polenta at a chef’s banquet. And they learn that she served
roasted chicken with bulgur, raisins, and chestnuts to her grandchildren when they were young. “What I love most is to cook and to have people over—I need that,” she told me when I visited her at home recently. “I wanted to discover which recipes and memories gave me the most pleasure, so I could share them.”

While Roden’s newest book is undoubtedly the most personal, her entire body of work has been defined by her lived experiences, particularly her generation’s forced departure from Egypt in the 1950s. Roden’s grandparents had immigrated to Egypt from Syria 60 years earlier, following the completion of the Suez Canal. “A lot of Jews were involved in trade, and for years Aleppo was one of the great stopping places from the East,” Roden said. As the canal shifted that locus of trade to Cairo, and caravans and camels gave way to ships, many Aleppo Jews followed suit. They settled in El Sakkakini, a newly established district on the edge of Cairo, erecting synagogues, kosher butchers, and Jewish schools to serve the community. “All of my father’s stories were from there,” Roden said.

In Syria, Roden’s family had been quite religiously observant. Her great-grandfather Haham Abraham ha Cohen Douek (Roden keeps a framed portrait of him in her kitchen) was the chief rabbi of Aleppo. When they first moved to Cairo, many of her family members remained religious. They also held onto their traditions, living and cooking, as Roden put it, “as though they were still in Syria.” But, as with countless Jewish immigration tales before and since, things changed in the next generation.

As Cairo’s Jews left El Sakkakini and relocated to grander, more diversely populated areas of the city, they began to see themselves as modern, cosmopolitan citizens. “Things like keeping kosher became a thing of the past,” Roden said. And yet, Cairo’s Jewish community remained tightly connected to their heritage. Roden’s extended family was enormous (“One of my father’s sisters had something like 18 children,” she recalled), and Roden fondly remembers holiday celebrations centered around long tables filled with kibbeh, tabbouleh, baba ghanouj, and syrupy pastries served with strong coffee.

Everything changed in the mid 1950s when tens of thousands of Jews, as well as Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and other ethnic minority groups, were expelled from Egypt. Many people from Roden’s community fled to London (where Roden was already living as an art student), either settling there permanently or passing through en route to America, Israel, or elsewhere in Europe. Roden’s grandparents had immigrated to Egypt from Syria in the 1950s. Roden’s grandparents had immigrated to Egypt from Syria 60 years earlier, following the completion of the Suez Canal. “A lot of Jews were involved in trade, and for years Aleppo was one of the great stopping places from the East,” Roden said. As the canal shifted that locus of trade to Cairo, and caravans and camels gave way to ships, many Aleppo Jews followed suit. They settled in El Sakkakini, a newly established district on the edge of Cairo, erecting synagogues, kosher butchers, and Jewish schools to serve the community. “All of my father’s stories were from there,” Roden said.

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Tablet

The Book of Middle Eastern Food and The Book of Jewish Food—were ahead of their time. And they created a pathway home for countless refugees and immigrants, just like herself.

“Basically all my mom’s recipes, which were the recipes of her childhood, came from Claudia’s books,” said Nathalie Istrou Ross, a Ph.D. student at University of North Texas who is writing her dissertation on the history of American Jewish cookbooks. Istrou Ross’ lineage shares a similar trajectory to Roden’s: a Sephardic Jewish family forced to flee Cairo. “For someone like me who never experienced Egypt, Claudia allowed me to capture the extended Jewish family I have never known, but always wanted to be a part of.”

Roden possesses a serene demeanor and a soft, lilting voice that, at first, gives the impression that she might be a little shy. But hearing her talk about her recipe-gathering process, her bravery and bold spirit becomes apparent. “Would you consider yourself an extrovert?” I asked, after she described approaching “anybody and everybody” on trains and at bus stops in pursuit of new recipes. “Oh, yes,” she said. “Growing up in the Mediterranean, we were not reserved—we fought to talk. That’s why I talk so much!” Living all of her adult life in the stereotypically reserved London, Roden missed the easy cacophony of her youth. Traveling around the Mediterranean for work ironically helped her feel at home.

Roden began working on Claudia Roden’s Mediterranean before the COVID-19 pandemic began. She already felt it was time to slow down, ease back a bit on her jet-setting life, and settle in. Her starting recipe list included hundreds of dishes: everything from the simple cucumber and tomato salad her mother used to make in Cairo, and the marble-sized meatballs with sour cherries her glamorous aunt Regine served at buffet parties, to a Sephardic flourless chocolate cake that her family baked to celebrate birthdays. “I would phone friends up and say, ‘I’m just making something to try, do you want to come for dinner?’” Roden told me. “I sort of created this new way of life for myself.”

When the first pandemic lockdown arrived in March 2020, the existing events on her calendar—an invitation to speak at a symposium or a dinner being held in her honor—were wiped clean. Like all of her peers, Roden spent the first many months of the pandemic in self-isolation, venturing out only to shop for groceries whenever she would. And yet she continues to bask in the pleasures of staying local—inviting neighbors and family over for a slice of walnut cake and strong coffee, and recreating the memories of the home she left so long ago.

This article was originally published on March 24, 2022.
Carciofi alla Giudia
Artichokes Jewish Style

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

12 small artichokes

Juice of 2 lemons

Olive oil for deep frying

1 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

½ cup fresh basil leaves

2 teaspoon sea salt or to taste

½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper

10 cloves garlic, crushed

Matzoh meal or flour for dredging

PREPARATION

Step 1
Trim the tops off the artichokes, working around the globe to retain the shape. Halve the lemons, juice them, and cover with cold water. Soak the artichokes in this lemon water until ready to use, then drain dry.

Step 2
Hold the artichokes by the stems and bang them a little against the countertop to open the leaves.

Step 3
Combine ½ cup of the olive oil, the parsley, basil, salt, pepper, and garlic and sprinkle the mixture between the leaves. Roll each artichoke in matzo meal or flour.

Step 4
Heat a large pot, wok, or Dutch oven with a cover, filled with about 3 inches of oil, to sizzling. Deep-fry 2–3 artichokes at a time for about 10 minutes, turning occasionally with a tongs; they will puff up as they cook. Serve hot, sprinkled with additional sea salt.

Yield: 6 servings

Hundreds of recipes at tabletmag.com/recipes