In his first public appearance after five years of semiofficial banishment, Curtis Yarvin began to cry. It was late February 2020 and Yarvin was the special guest at a live podcast in Los Angeles. A graphic promoting the event shows the computer engineer turned political philosopher, then 46 years old, wearing his black leather motorcycle jacket and wire-framed glasses and staring out with practiced intensity. Over Yarvin’s left shoulder floats a bust of the deceased rapper Lil Peep. The moody digital aesthetic is called vaporwave. Ma, Pa, have you heard of vaporwave? It is a very of-the-moment style that uses retro computer graphics to evoke the feeling of haunting nostalgia for a vanishing human presence.

The metaphor was apt. In 2014, Yarvin—who had spent seven years blogging about politics and society under the name Mencius Moldbug—went silent, shifting his attention back to his grand project of building a functional software stack called Urbit that promised to revolutionize computing. But his political pronouncements soon caught up to him. In 2016, after the second planned talk at a computer programming conference was canceled on account of his political views, Yarvin found himself writing lines like: “I am not an ‘outspoken advocate for slavery,’ a racist, a sexist or a fascist.” As anyone who’s been on the internet lately can tell you, a person who must publicly deny that they are a fascist has already lost. When the invitations stopped coming, Yarvin didn’t protest.

“When I invited him to be a guest at that event, he was truly radioactive,” the podcast’s organizer, a young intellectual entrepreneur named Justin Murphy, told me recently. The scene brought out LA art hipsters, connoisseurs of civilizational decline, and PayPal founder Peter Thiel. The billionaire, who was one of the first investors in Facebook and has been a longtime patron of Yarvin’s, drank Pabst Blue Ribbon and ate pizza. Thiel’s car idled outside the club, engine on, driver behind the wheel, ready in case the need arose for a sudden exit. Rumor has it that Thiel takes this precaution wherever he goes, but it was not out of place that evening. Murphy, who spent several years in his 20s participating in militant “black bloc” anarchist protests, was worried antifa might show up to protest the event.

The night went off without a hitch. Yarvin had chosen an ideal venue to reemerge, with podcasts providing one of the only channels left to reach the public now that the glossy magazines, publishing houses, and other arteries for circulating new ideas had been choked.
morality. Starting in the late 2000s, his name—not his real name, he was still known then by his blogging pseudonym—began to be whispered among some of the most powerful people in the country, a secret society made up of disaffected members of the American elite.

Shortly after Donald Trump entered the White House, reports started to circulate that Yarvin was secretly advising Trump strategist Steve Bannon. His writing, according to one article, had established the “theoretical groundwork for Trumpism.”

Yarvin denied the rumors, sometimes playfully and at other times strenuously. But he was consistent in his criticisms of the Trumpian approach to politics. Mass populist rallies and red MAGA hats struck him as merely a weak imitation of democratic energies that had already died out. “Trump is a throwback from the past, not an omen of the future,” he wrote in 2016. “The future is grey anonymous bureaucrats, more Brezhnev every year.”

What Yarvin is, if one wants to be accurate, is the founder of neoreaction, an ideological school that emerged on the internet in the late 2000s marrying the classic anti-modern, anti-democratic worldview of 18th-century reactionaries to a post-libertarian ethos that embraced technological capitalism as the proper means for administering society. Against democracy. Against equality. Against the liberal faith in an arc of history that bends toward justice.

Instead, neoreactionaries subscribe to the classical idea that history moves in cycles. In an era when the iconic Shepard Fairey portrait of Barack Obama captured the HOPE of the nation, Yarvin and his followers were busy explaining why liberal democracy was already doomed.

Unlike some of the other neoreactionary writers that emerged in the last 20 years, Yarvin possessed a style that, even when discoursing at great length on the gold standard or obscure historical matters, never suggested powdered wigs. He wrote like what he was: a hyperintelligent Ivy League autodidact and wiseass tech geek masking his childhood insecurities with an aura of infallibility, who shared the same set of subcultural off by the narrowing band of acceptable opinions.

Depending on what circles you run in, it can seem like everyone now has an opinion about Curtis Yarvin—and that includes me. We were introduced in 2017 when I received a short, unsolicited email from him calling me a “fake writer” working in a “fake century.” The email arrived after I’d published an essay that mentioned Yarvin a handful of times and referred to him as “an architect of antidemocratic, Neoreactionary politics.” The brashness, it turned out, was just Yarvin’s way of getting my attention. Thus began an occasional correspondence that has included a handful of interactions over the last five years. And so, without giving it a great deal of thought, I added myself to the extended network of people being courted, outraged, and shaped by the man and his work.

Like Niccolò Machiavelli, to whom he is sometimes compared, Yarvin defines himself as an amoral realist who invented a new theory of government that upends established doctrines of political
and sitcom references found in anyone else his age. At its best, this approach made difficult ideas accessible—not to mention viral. In one of his earliest blog posts, Yarvin birthed the now-ubiquitous meme of “the red pill,” a metaphor he borrowed from *The Matrix* movies and turned into a worldwide catchphrase describing the revelation of a suppressed truth that shatters progressive illusions and exposes a harsh underlying reality.

In Yarvin’s worldview, what keeps American democracy running today is not elections but illusions projected by a set of institutions, including the press and universities, that work in tandem with the federal bureaucracy in a complex he calls the Cathedral. “The mystery of the Cathedral,” Yarvin writes, “is that all the modern world’s legitimate and prestigious intellectual institutions, even though they have no central organizational connection, behave in many ways as if they were a single organizational structure.”

Living Americans might be able to glean a sense of the phenomenon Yarvin describes in the current public discourse. It has often seemed in recent years that every few weeks has brought a new instance in which journalists and experts instantaneously, almost magically converged on shared talking points related to the hysteria du jour—cycling through moral crusades to free children from cages at the U.S. border, save the post office from a fascist coup, label the filibuster a tool of white supremacy, and so on. The power of the Cathedral is that it cannot be seen because it is located everywhere and nowhere, baked into the architecture of how we live, communicate, and think.

The night that Yarvin reemerged onto the scene at the LA event, the story that moved him to tears concerned the life of the English writer Freda Utley, who became a communist in 1928—an era, he observed archly, when “anyone who was smart or cool was a communist.” Utley moved to the Soviet Union and a few years later her husband was arrested and shipped to the gulag never to be seen again. She fled to the United States with her infant son and tried to warn her friends that their imagined utopia was really a police state. “Of course, her friends are like, ‘Do I know you? Who is this anti-Soviet person knocking at the door? They’re like, ‘Fuck you.’” Yarvin arrived at the moral of his story: “You really shouldn’t expect the material rewards of success to come along with the spiritual rewards of telling the truth.” He swallowed a sob. “You really shouldn’t,” he said, and wiped a tear from his eye.

In Yarvin’s parable, he is both the betrayed figure of Utley, martyred for telling the truth, and the above-it-all narrator explaining how the world really works. To his readers, his immense, fortresslike body of work offers one of the only redoubts where they can glimpse the realities of power behind the political circus. To his skeptics, he is a minor fraud whose claims to be a truth-telling iconoclast belie a fundamental affinity with the status quo. Yarvin’s calls to do away with democracy and turn, say, Elon Musk into America’s new CEO king—that’s just the liberal technocratic system we already have on speed, an acceleration into the most dystopian aspects of the endless neoliberal present. To his critics, he is, as noted, a fascist. They point to a handful of his statements from a decade ago, including one in which he argued that certain races were better suited to slavery than others, and to the fact that the central pillar of his outlook is an avid opposition to the principles of democracy and equality. Yarvin, they say, is not a victim but the sender-off to the gulags; behind his tears, he plots to oppress minorities and tear down whatever remains of liberal democracy.

The essence of Yarvin as a historical figure begins not with his politics but his talents as a computer engineer, or programmer, the latter of which is his preferred label since he sees himself as a builder of things that work, not simply a manipulator of symbols. To separate his roots in technology from the politics he developed is to miss what is most powerful about him—his understanding of the hidden designs behind the systems of knowledge and power that keep both computers and societies running. The universal rule that he deduced is almost mystical in its simplicity: Order is good, not merely in an instrumental sense because it leads to virtuous outcomes; it is good in itself. Whatever leads to more of it is also good, while anything that produces disorder is bad.

While conservatives who have come to embrace Yarvin speak of restoring natural rights and using state power to direct the common good, for him, “it is impossible to go directly from hypocrisy to morality. A cleansing bath of amorality must intervene.” Yarvin is not a nationalist or a populist, nor even a conservative. Rather, he is the signature example of a political theorist born after the death of 20th-century mass political movements, on the unsettled terrain of the internet. Whether you like it or not, Yarvin is the philosopher of, at the very least, our near future.

The father of neoreaction was raised in the bosom of the American state. His paternal grandparents were Jewish American communists. Yarvin’s father worked for the U.S. government as a foreign service officer, which took his family overseas to Portugal, Cyprus, and the Dominican Republic. His mother was a Protestant from Westchester County who eventually also joined the civil service, as did Yarvin’s stepfather. The progeny of this Jewish-WASP-Stalinist, civil service, Cold War liberal American heritage was a child math prodigy

“To his readers, his immense, fortresslike body of work offers one of the only redoubts where they can glimpse the realities of power behind the political circus.”
and computer whiz who liked to write poetry. It didn’t make social life easy, especially when his family returned to the United States just as he began high school.

“I had already skipped one grade back in Fairfax County and they did an admission test, so I skipped two more and then I’m 11 in ninth grade,” he told me. “Then we come back to the States and I go to an American public high school in Columbia, Maryland, and I’m a 12-year-old sophomore, which is definitely wack.”

At 15, Yarvin entered college as part of Johns Hopkins’ longitudinal Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth. A year later, he transferred to Brown University in Rhode Island as a legacy admission to the Ivy League liberal arts college, where his parents had met in the mid-’60s. After graduating, it was on to a computer science Ph.D. program at Berkeley. He dropped out after a year and a half to take a tech job at the height of the go-go ’90s dot-com era.

In late adolescence, Yarvin had a formative experience on an early internet message board called Usenet. “It was a decentralized system, and more importantly it had this amazing form of admission control because everyone on it was an engineering student or worked at a tech company or something,” Yarvin told me. He participated on forums like talk.bizarre, absorbing the inside jokes and new iterative patterns of thinking that were being developed on the outskirts of the research community. “You had this sort of de facto aristocracy that didn’t know it was an aristocracy, and then it fell apart.”

“After the dot-com crash, I was left with a newly acquired girlfriend (who would become my wife), a few hundred thousand dollars, and a place in San Francisco,” Yarvin told me of his early career. The buyout came from his job at a mobile software company that was founded in 1996 as Libris before changing its name to Unwired Planet, and then Phone.com. The settlement was “considerably less than ‘fuck you’ money,” Yarvin said, but enough to finance an extended self-education in history and political theory that was attained by searching through Google’s ‘library of everything, ever,’ which was brand new at the time.

“My ideas really came from reading the Austrian School—Mises and Rothbard—and then Hoppe. Hoppe opened a kind of door to the pre-revolutionary world for me,” Yarvin has said. A German-born political theorist and leading proponent of Austrian School economics, Hans-Hermann Hoppe has called himself an anarcho-capitalist, a title borrowed from his mentor Murray Rothbard. Hoppe theorized a distinction between monarchy, which he defined as “privately owned government,” and democracy, classified as “publicly owned government.” In the introduction to his 2001 book, Democracy: The God That Failed, Hoppe called “the transition from monarchy to democracy” a source of “civilizational decline.”

From Hoppe, Yarvin took the idea that “all organizations, big or small, public or private, military or civilian, are managed best when managed by a single executive.”

If democracy is so decrepit and ineffective, one might ask how it is that America became the world’s great superpower and maintained that position for the last century. Yarvin’s answer contains two parts: first, that nothing lasts forever. Second, while American supremacy may once have rested on innovation and growth, the country, now a bloated empire, has been surviving for decades on the power of myth-making and mass illusions.

Whether or not he can be compared to Machiavelli the man, it is correct to describe Yarvin as a Machiavellian, in the meaning given to that term by the American political writer James Burnham, a one-time follower of Leon Trotsky who later became a committed anti-communist. Like the historical figures chronicled in Burnham’s book The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom, Yarvin believes that one of the worst aspects of democracy is the fact that it rarely exists. Because democracy is the rule of the many, and the rule of the many is inherently unstable, democracies rarely last long.

Burnham argues that all complex societies are in effect oligarchies ruled by a small number of elites. To hide this fact and legitimize their rule in the eyes of the masses, oligarchies employ the powers of mystification and propaganda. Indeed, Yarvin believes that America stopped being a democracy sometime after the end of World War II and became instead a “bureaucratic oligarchy”—meaning that political power is concentrated within a small group of people who are selected not on the basis of hereditary title or pure merit but through their entry into the bureaucratic organs of the state. What remains of American democracy is pageantry and symbolism, which has about as much connection to the real thing as the city of Orlando has to Disney World.

In place of a functional democratic system, Yarvin came to believe, there now exists an industrial-scale symbolic apparatus that generates the illusion of political agency necessary for society’s real rulers to carry out their business undisturbed. American voters still go to the polls to pick their leader, but the president is a ceremonial figure beholden to the permanent bureaucracy.

“The structure of democratic societies creates two tiers of power,” observed the French sociologist and eminent defender of liberalism, Raymond Aron, in his appraisal of Burnham’s book. While one tier of power is made up of industrialists, military generals, and other decision-makers operating in the shadows, in public their interests are represented by the second tier made up of “those who know how to talk.” The problem identified by the Machiavellians, says Aron, is that while the talkers are not necessarily competent leaders, they nevertheless gain power because “debating regimes oil the wheels for those who know how to use words.” There you have the two paths to power in a democracy: secrecy for the plutocratic persons of action, or, for those in the public political class, skill at deceit.

While Yarvin’s vision has as much or
more in common with left critiques of the state dating back to the 1960s, his solutions are openly reactionary—looking back to the 17th century rather than forward to a promised socialist-utopian future.

In 2007, Yarvin, writing as Mencius Moldbug, started his blog Unqualified Reservations. His themes, now clearly established, were reflected in his earliest published work: “Democracy as an Adaptive Fiction,” “Why, When, and How to Abolish the United States,” and “Against Political Freedom.” At the time, Yarvin’s paid work was still with the San Francisco-based Urbit where, with funding from Thiel, he was immersed in a yearslong project to write a new programming language from scratch and decentralize the ownership of data. Even in the Olympian culture of Silicon Valley, where the microdosing transhumanists all had startups promising to engineer a brave new humanity, Urbit’s project was considered wildly ambitious, if not a bit mad.

The initial Moldbug audience was made up of fellow Silicon Valley misfits and disaffected amateur intellectuals with high-speed internet connections, the kind of people interested in his sardonic style and unconventional approach to history and political thought.

Everywhere one looked in the Moldbugian scheme, things were not what they seemed. Beneath the surface of modern progressivism, for instance, Yarvin found that the sacraments and dogmas of America’s founding Protestant religion had been preserved. The now common criticism that the liberal activist culture of wokeness is a kind of secular religion picks up on arguments Yarvin was making in 2007 about mainstream liberal universalism, which he dubbed “CryptoCalvinism.”

This new techno-monarchist ideology of neoreaction developed in connection with other post-millennial intellectual movements in Silicon Valley like “post-rationalism.” By the late-2000s, while the U.S. culture and economy appeared stagnant, if not in outright decline, the technology sector was expanding its power and reach as apparently the only industry left in America still capable of innovation. The ideas coming out of the valley reflected that disparity and a growing feeling there that American liberal democracy was an obsolete operating system, impeding the tech sector’s growth and with it the march of progress.

Other key figures to emerge in neoreaction included the writer Michael Anissimov, and the British philosopher Nick Land, a former Marxist and devotee of French critical theory who gave the title Dark Enlightenment to his extended study of Yarvin’s oeuvre. Adjacent to neoreaction was the digital fascism of the “alternative right,” which emerged a few years later. The alt-right, as it was also known, was another internet-based ideological movement but one that emphasized anarchic nihilism, rabid racism, and demonization of Jews. Neoreactionaries, by contrast, while comfortable expressing their own racial and ethnic bigotries, tended to downplay their political importance and eschewed the online Nazi role-playing of the alt-right as dim-witted and self-destructive. In a series of early essays, “Why I am not a White Nationalist” and “Why I am not an Anti-Semite,” Yarvin offered an analysis of those ideologies that was not entirely unsympathetic before ultimately rejecting them.

How could he be a fascist, Yarvin protested, when he so clearly detested “the masses” and “the people”—two of fascism’s most celebrated subjects?

Perhaps the best known of the Silicon Valley democracy skeptics was Thiel. “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible,” Thiel wrote in 2009. “The great task for libertarians,” he declared, “is to find an escape from politics in all its forms—from the totalitarian and fundamentalist catastrophes to the unhinging demos that guides so-called ‘social democracy.’”

Yet for Yarvin, even though libertarianism may be right about the best way to organize society, it fails because it is unwise about power. An all-powerful state is necessary, a sovereign Leviathan of the kind envisioned by Thomas Hobbes, to impose order by force on a level of such absolute authority that it can then disappear from day-to-day life.

Having concluded that democracy is a failed and dying form of governance, one that increasingly produces more disorder than order, Yarvin provided a vision for what could come next: an enlightened corporate monarchy that would only arrive after a hard reboot of the political system. It was a vision of total regime change, but one achieved without any violence or even activism since those efforts were doomed to fail and would therefore only strengthen the system they sought to overthrow. For those who believed in it, the next step was to generate the ideas that a future elite would use to run the country once it seized power.

And who should the rulers be, exactly? Rather than a hereditary dynasty, Yarvin proposed the Elizabathan structure of the joint-stock company used by the British East India Company as the best means for selecting and overseeing the monarch. The state, rather than tyrannizing its subjects or being controlled by citizens who endowed its authority, “should be operated as a profitable corporation governed proportionally by its beneficiaries.” Elsewhere, he puts it differently: “I favor absolute monarchy in the abstract sense: unconditional...
personal authority, subject to some responsibility mechanism.”

Some readers may dwell on the weight that the rather vague “some responsibility mechanism” bears in this program for the enlightened monarchies of the future. For Yarvin, the answer is always more power.

While Peter Thiel has since disavowed his rejection of democracy—in public at least—and is now financing the U.S. Senate campaigns of a new breed of MAGA 2.0 populists like J.D. Vance and Blake Masters, Yarvin has not wavered.

Power, according to Yarvin, is like computer code, binary. It is either on or off; final and absolute, or merely a glorified form of servitude. Even the tech giants, which he considers the only efficient organizations left in the United States, are powerless. Facebook may be able to ban anyone it wants while controlling the flow of critical information to billions of people across the globe, but Mark Zuckerberg still has to answer to midlevel government functionaries—a relationship demonstrated by the Facebook CEO’s reluctant embrace of a Democratic Party approved fact-checking apparatus. Even if Zuckerberg wanted to raise an army to stage a coup, it’s not clear what target he could strike. “[F]or all practical revolutionary purposes,” Yarvin wrote in May of 2020. “the ‘deep state’ is as decentralized as Bitcoin, and as invulnerable—to ballots and bullets alike.”

Because the goal for Yarvin is to force power out of the bureaucratic shadows and make it visible, he sees the brute force approach of China’s government as a positive example. After all, what is the opposite of the U.S. deep state with its esoteric CryptoCalvinist dogmas, if not the overtly state-worshipping ideology of the Chinese Communist Party where the government’s capacity for violence is never far from the surface? It’s an analysis that for Yarvin and others of his ilk approaches its own dogma. As recently as last December, Yarvin maintained that China’s “zero-COVID” surveillance state approach to the pandemic, in which millions of people have been confined to their homes in citywide quarantines, entails “fewer covid restrictions than citizens of the reddest American red state.”

What is bizarre about the reaction to the neoreactionaries is not the perfectly understandable revulsion at this adoration of China, or at their racial and ethnic bigotry, but the outrage over their attack on democracy. Philosophers and politicians like Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, to name only three among countless figures, including many on the left, have been outspoken in their warnings about democracy’s perils. That is to say nothing of the current American ruling class, which treats ordinary people with aristocratic contempt, openly conspires to suppress reporting that might get the “wrong” candidate elected, and organizes “shadow campaigns” to undermine popular elections—all in the name of democracy. If Yarvin’s political musings about democracy are a danger to the future of American democracy, as they may well be, one can only ask what that means for the actions and statements of the people who are currently in power.

The temptation to squeeze Yarvin into the premade villain costume of a contemporary morality play may be temporarily satisfying, but if its aim was to shut him down or curb his influence, it has failed. He’s back in the public sphere now with more time than ever after departing Urbit in 2019, and he has a busy schedule of podcast appearances. It seems likely, in fact, that ignoring Yarvin’s incisive diagnosis of the American political system, or reducing it to cartoonish villainy, will only benefit him and other opponents of democracy who are more than happy to see the American system continue its slow breakdown.

It also misses the fatal weakness of Yarvin’s ideology: For all of its power as a systemic analysis, it contains no place for human beings. The classic question in philosophy—what is the good life?—never intrudes on Yarvin’s pursuit of designing beautiful machines.

I once asked Yarvin whether he saw his computer programming and writing as drawing on different parts of his brain. “My love of computer science has always been in systems because it’s essentially architecture, you’re building something that has to have a very large component of aesthetics in it,” he told me. “You’re in a situation where maybe even more than in architecture, you know this works because it’s beautiful.”

Later in the conversation, he expanded on this point. “When you’re building system software, you’re in this position of this demiurge,” he said using the term from gnostic theology for a minor, and typically false, god. The matter of the individual, not as a political subject but as a sentient, feeling agent possessing intrinsic needs and desires, seems not so much a matter Yarvin avoids as one that almost never occurs to him in his political writing. Even where his designs are most immaculate, they are somehow bereft—like a beautiful but empty city.

On Feb. 1, 2020, before any COVID cases were reported in the United States and a few weeks before his comeback podcast appearance, Yarvin published an essay warning that the novel coronavirus could become a devastating global pandemic. He also predicted that it wouldn’t matter. He pronounced America a failed state, unable to envision, let alone muster the capacity to take the kind of decisive action that, according to Yarvin, was being modeled by China’s “zero-COVID” approach to the virus. “The hard truth,” he wrote a few months later, “is that the virus is not just
a test of our government. It is a test of our form of government.”

The following summer, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan while barely firing a shot. America’s trillion-dollar investment in the Afghan Security Forces was exposed as a Ponzi scheme and collapsed overnight. In the final chaotic days of the war, U.S. forces struck a deal with the Taliban, their sworn enemy of the past two decades, to provide security at the airfield where final evacuations were taking place. Shortly after that, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the airport killing 13 American service members and some 170 Afghan civilians.

No general or political leader was blamed for America’s longest war ending in humiliating defeat. No one was fired or resigned. Moreover, the total lack of accountability for a catastrophic systemwide failure is, according to Yarvin, not a problem that could be solved by electing better leaders or applying more political will, because it is an essential feature of the system’s design. “Why did this happen?” Yarvin asked. “Very simply: because no one is in charge of the government.”

Not the wrong people; no one.

Is that possible? If things were really that bad, wouldn’t we be able to tell?

Maybe not. Without losing your balance, try to work back through the many sharp reversals of public policy and elite opinion since the beginning of the pandemic. In February 2020, when Yarvin first issued his warning, it was considered a sign of right-wing racial paranoia to be worried at all about the virus in China. “The actual danger of coronavirus: fear may fuel racism and xenophobia that threaten human rights,” intoned The Washington Post. A few months later, the Great and Good changed their minds and declared the pandemic an unprecedented emergency demanding a nationwide shutdown. Schools and playgrounds were locked. Children were masked. The police were called out to break up weddings and prayer services held by religious communities that insisted on endangering the rest of the country by carrying on with their primitive rituals. Then the Black Lives Matter protests began that summer, and the switch was flipped again. Now, national leaders and public health officials donned the kente cloths of their own religious rituals and joined the throngs. A dazzling new form of Jesuitical argumentation was invented in which the crowding of tens of thousands of people together in the streets was not merely justified in spite of the risks, but redefined as a public health measure to combat the chronic threat of white supremacy and thus not in conflict with “the science.”

Witnessing this spectacle, I have found it easy to picture myself as the member of a captive audience watching a parade of soldiers march by in crisp uniforms, executing their synchronized movements to form images of hammers, surface-to-air missiles, and other icons of the glorious people’s republic. Only here it was not North Korean conscripts marching but the best fed and most thoroughly educated Americans—university professors, journalists, scientists, surgeons general—who clicked their heels and pivoted in unison. How, one had to wonder in amazement, did they always stay on message even as the messaging changed so often and abruptly?

Yarvin’s answer, of course, is the Cathedral. At one and the same time, the Cathedral is simply a name for the uncanny degree of agreement between the media, universities, and other organs of elite culture, and a theory explaining how the aggregate effect of that agreement is a system of Orwellian mind-control that projects an illusion of freedom so powerful it blinds people to reality.

The question many people have, of course, is whether such a structure actually exists. After two years of COVID, following the disintegration of the liberal state, and the emergence of evermore eccentric ideological impositions, coordinated on what seems like an hourly basis by an invisible yet apparently all-powerful hand, which has no need to account for its nakedly visible contradictions and failures, the answer seems obvious: Either you see it, or you don’t.
A shooting in the city of Bnei Brak that left at least five people dead is the third in a wave of recent terrorist attacks in Israel and brings the total number of people killed over the past eight days to eleven. This appears to have been the deadliest single week of terror attacks in Israel since 2006." Israeli law enforcement and media sources have identified the gunman responsible for the shooting Tuesday night as Dia Hamarsha, a 27-year-old man who had previously been spent more than two years in Israeli prisons on terrorism-related charges. While the previous two attacks over the past week—a mass stabbing in the southern city of Beersheba that killed four civilians and a shooting in Hadera that killed two border guards—both involved Arab Israeli citizens who had previously attempted to join the Islamic State, Hamarsha was a Palestinian from a West Bank village near Jenin who appears to have entered Bnei Brak illegally, possibly as a worker on a construction site in the area. Bnei Brak, which is just east of Tel Aviv, is known as the home to a large community of religious Jews. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a Palestinian terrorist group, claimed responsibility for the killing.

With only 26% of Americans believing Biden has the capacity to manage a crisis or the military, according to an Associated Press poll taken before he left for Europe last week, Biden’s several gaffes might further erode the United States’ confidence in Biden, just as midterm campaign season picks up in earnest, without Biden having delivered on his campaign promises on national healthcare, progressive taxation, and relief on either student or medical debt. Biden sent Congress a new budget proposal that includes a $2 billion bump for federal law agencies and $30 billion that would spread out over the next 10 years to expand crime-prevention efforts—a decidedly sharp contrast against the defund-the-police advocates in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that establishment Democrats continue to criticize as toxic, especially for the key rural voters likely to determine both the midterm and 2024 elections.

The president of BlackRock Inc., the world’s largest asset manager worth about $10 trillion, warned Tuesday that "scarcity inflation" would lead to widespread shortages in the United States, hitting younger Americans especially hard. "For the first time, this generation is going to go into a store and not be able to get what they want," Rob Kapito told an audience in Texas on Tuesday. According to Kapito, scarcity inflation is a product of shortage in the labor pool, agricultural supply, and housing stock combined with high energy prices.

The legal marijuana industry is booming, but weed shops are facing a surge of robberies. In Washington State, where recreational weed use was legalized in 2012, the industry sees $1.4 billion in sales, bringing the state more than half a billion dollars in tax revenue. Yet dispensaries and pot shops are routinely targeted by thieves: Armed robberies are up almost 100% in 2022, with 67 incidents this year to date compared to 34 in all of 2021. This year has also seen three store workers killed during such robberies. Marijuana shops are burglarized because (obviously) they’re full of marijuana, but also because they’re full of cash. The stores cannot accept credit cards as marijuana remains illegal according to federal drug laws, and thus barred from many traditional banking services.
The End of Citizenship

BY MICHAEL LIND

In the spring of 2022, speculation in the commentariat that partisan rivalries were bringing the United States to the verge of actual civil war abruptly came to an end. With few exceptions, Americans of left, right, and center rallied around the national colors. Postmodern multiculturalism and anti-Enlightenment paleoconservatism suddenly were marginalized by romantic nationalism of the 19th-century variety. As war fever swept America, progressives and conservatives joined in denouncing not only the enemy government but also the enemy people and their enemy music, enemy literature, and enemy cuisine. Americans displayed the national flag in every imaginable form and pledged undying hatred of the nation’s foes.

The nation that Americans celebrated was not their own, but rather Ukraine, following the brutal Russian invasion of the former Soviet republic. Liberal Americans who would have thought it vulgar if not fascist to wave the Stars and Stripes took selfies with the blue and gold of Ukraine’s national flag. Democrats and Republicans who routinely demonize the leaders of the rival American party engaged in a kind of sentimental, uncritical hero worship of Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, which would have been mocked had its object been Joe Biden or Donald Trump. Neoconservatives and centrist liberals used the Ukraine war as an opportunity to settle scores by accusing opponents in the rival party and rivals in their own parties of moral if not legal treason for less than total and uncritical support of a foreign country with which the United States does not even have an alliance.

Whether the war in Ukraine is a final aftershock of the first Cold War or the first major proxy war in Cold War II remains to be seen. The sudden outburst of vicarious Ukrainian patriotism on the part of many Americans—as well as people in similar North Atlantic democracies—seems like a Freudian “return of the repressed.” Taught that celebrating their own national traditions is racist and xenophobic, and deprived of opportunities to play a meaningful role in national defense, many Americans and Western Europeans have found an outlet for a lost sense of belonging by borrowing the national pride of another nation.

Long before the United States began selling green cards—the tickets to U.S. citizenship—to rich foreigners by creating the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Visa Program in 1990, American citizenship had been devalued. From the days of the Greek city-states and the Roman republic to the city-republics of the Renaissance and the cantons of Switzerland, citizenship in the fullest sense originally involved active participation of citizens—a group not only male but also usually smaller than the population as a whole—in the government of their communities, as electors, office-holders, jurors, and citizen-soldiers.

In practice, the ideal of the amateur, omnicompetent citizen—a member of the militia today, a town or county council member tomorrow and a juror next week—could be realized only in small, relatively undeveloped communities. The ideal of the self-sufficient family farmer with a musket and a copy of the Constitution on the fireplace mantle was a casualty of economic centralization and modernization. Most Americans are proletarians who live from paycheck to paycheck, and a majority of American workers are employed by firms with more than 500 employees and supervised by salaried corporate bureaucrats.

The ideal of the male citizen-soldier who earns his civil rights by contributing to the defense of the republic survived for a while by being transferred to the colossal modern nation-state, whose citizens, mostly unknown to one another, are united by common culture, institutions, location, or some combination of the three. For a time, the mass national conscript army and its reserves were thought of, however implausibly, as the heir to the local militia. The older tradition of civic republicanism inspired the linkage of military service to government benefits like the GI Bill and other privileges for veterans. That link was all but eliminated by the abolition of the draft in 1973. Today’s American military is a professional force, more like those of premodern European bureaucratic monarchies than frontier militias.

The right to vote remains, but its power has been diluted, even as it has been extended in law and practice—first to white men without property, then to white women, and finally to nonwhite citizens. In a world of industrialized nations, in which even small countries are vastly more populous than the city-republics of antiquity and the Middle Ages, scale alone ensures that the influence that any one individual can exert by voting periodically in free and fair elections is negligible.

While the positive duties formerly associated with citizenship have gradually been discarded, there has been a trend to establish government requirements for the provision of positive rights or benefits, from public or publicly funded education and public retirement spending to guaranteed health care. As a result, in the United States and other Western democracies, it is widely accepted in the 21st century that national citizens have a right to various public goods and welfare services without any need to earn the benefits at all, purely on the basis of their status as citizens of a particular nation-state.

Already by the 1960s and the 1970s, the link between a citizen’s personal contribution and a citizen’s right to
government benefits was being questioned. Ever since the free market champion Milton Friedman proposed a negative income tax in the 1960s, many libertarians as well as progressives have supported the idea of a universal basic income, an idea which became the basis of Andrew Yang’s unsuccessful campaign to win the Democratic nomination for the presidency in 2020. Support for a UBI tends to be strongest among rentiers in Silicon Valley and the financial sector. Opposition tends to come from the dwindling ranks of old-fashioned, pro-union labor liberals, for whom dignified work is a positive good, and conservative traditionalists warning against neo-Roman “bread and circuses” that would demoralize and pacify the population.

One by one, then, the requirements and duties historically associated with republican citizenship—such as property ownership, a degree of economic independence, and service in the citizen-military—have dropped away, leaving citizenship finally as a mere right to government welfare, along with just treatment under the law. But even this is unsatisfactory to ethical cosmopolitan thinkers. After all, a purely national system of government-guaranteed health care or other national welfare programs benefit only those who happen to be citizens of particular nation-states. In a world characterized by extreme inequality among nations, and not merely within them, this seems unfair. Why should being born on one side of the southwestern border of the United States entitle you to a much better life than being born on the other side?

The classic nationalist answer is that national citizens either belong to, or aspire to belong to, a single people (if you approve of nationalism) or a single tribe (if you don’t approve of nationalism). Note that this is the answer of modern, post-18th-century nationalism, which holds out legal and political if not economic equality within the nation as an ideal. It was not the answer of the pre-modern city-state republics, in which the citizens were often a privileged minority or aristocracy within a population consisting mostly of peasants, serfs, or slaves, and had to earn their special civic privileges by special civic duties. Without any obligation on the part of citizens to earn their legal privileges or welfare benefits by serving the political community, the modern nation-state based on common culture or ethnicity becomes a tribal trust fund, rather like those managed by the U.S. federal government on behalf of Native American nations.

From this it follows that much of the debate about immigration in relatively affluent Western democracies has to do with the effect on national welfare state programs. Populists on the right often fear that their countries are becoming international welfare magnets and worry that they will have to compete with immigrants for government welfare programs, public services, or public housing. With tragic exceptions like Ukraine, most Western nationalists view excessive immigration, or immigration of the wrong kind, as a greater danger than armed invasion. “Fredonia for the Fredonians” has been replaced, in the 21st century, by “Fredonian Health Care for the Fredonians!”

In response, anti-nationalists on the left denounce “welfare chauvinism”—a pejorative term for the all-but-universal practice of limiting a country’s welfare programs to its citizens and, in some cases, legal immigrants. Absent a global government, there is unlikely to be a planetary version of Social Security or Medicare. Even on the radical left, few nowadays advocate world federalism of the kind many progressive intellectuals dreamed of in the era of the League of Nations and the early United Nations. Instead of attempting to replace the system of nation-states, many on the left advocate blurring the borders of nation-states by making illegal immigrants as well as legal immigrants eligible for publicly funded national welfare programs.

Aiding in this effort is the tendency of the mainstream press in the United States and other English-speaking countries—which is to say, the elite center-left press—to erase any distinction between legal and illegal immigration. Increasingly, the words “immigrants” or “migrants” are used to describe both authorized and unauthorized immigrants.

On March 4, the Miami Herald used a similarly innovative rhetorical technique in both the headline and the text of a story on immigration: scare quotes. In order to imply that there is something controversial and possibly illegitimate about the distinction between illegal and legal immigration, the story, “[State] Senate passes bill seeking to keep ‘unlawful’ migrants from being brought to Florida,” reads:

The proposal—approved by the Senate on Thursday along party lines—seeks to cramp the flow of undocumented immigrants into the state by targeting companies that transport people who are “unlawfully” in the country into Florida. Unaccompanied migrant children, who under federal immigration law have “no lawful immigration status,” would be included, according to immigration attorneys ... Republican lawmakers tried to quell concerns that the proposal would have an impact on children by narrowing the definition of who would be considered an “unauthorized alien” under state law.

How many “scare quotes” can you “put” into one “story”? Distinctions between legal and illegal immigrants are in fact a matter of federal law; not questionable characterizations motivated by bigotry, as the article implies.

With the euphemism “undocumented” immigrant, the distinction between citizenship and noncitizenship completely collapses. A foreign national who violates immigration laws by sneaking into the country or overstaying a temporary visa becomes someone “without papers,” reducing citizenship—once an honor to be fought for—to a matter of paperwork, with no moral or political significance.

With the erasure of even the limited and banal definition of citizenship as...
the right of a citizen of a nation-state to receive welfare benefits that are denied to foreign nationals, we have come—in theory, though not yet in practice—to the erasure of the nation-state and its replacement by something else. Call it the charity-state.

If the premodern republican city-state is a limited local self-help club for active members with duties as well as benefits, and the modern democratic nation-state, minus military conscription, is a tribal trust fund, the postmodern charity-state is a country conceived of as a philanthropy or a nonprofit. Its purpose is not to selfishly serve its members, but to help the needy, wherever they might be in the world. If various rights, including positive rights to taxpayer-funded welfare, are universal human rights, not merely perks of membership in a city-state or nation-state, then it makes no sense to limit the spending of treasure or blood to the formal citizens of the charity-state. The country becomes merely the arbitrary headquarters of a global charity—a global charity that may have an army, navy, and air force to help it do good anywhere and everywhere in the world, by invading other countries and replacing their governments, if necessary.

Nothing could be further from the ancient origins of citizenship in neighbors vowing mutual self-help than the crusading charity-state, whose propagandists dismiss narrow civic or national self-interest as mere selfishness in favor of global humanitarian altruism. The Latin word “republic” is derived from “res publica,” that which is held in common by a community with limited membership. The phrase “commonwealth” expresses the same idea. The republic or commonwealth is like a credit union whose members pool their savings to better help themselves. If the managers of the credit union, out of genuine altruism or social status-seeking, decide to donate the assets of the credit union to this or that noble humanitarian cause, they have betrayed their fiduciary duty to the depositors and looted the institution they were hired to manage.

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COMMUNITY

A Different Ball Game

Jewish athletes have long made all-or-nothing decisions about playing on holy days. An Orthodox basketball star’s proposed compromise could change that.

BY ZEV ELEFF

Yeshiva University basketball star Ryan Turell announced this month that he will enter the NBA draft in June. A Division III standout, Turell was, in his final season, college basketball’s leading scorer across all NCAA divisions. If selected, the 6-foot-7 shooting guard will be the NBA’s first Orthodox Jewish player. One major obstacle to playing professional sports for Orthodox Jews is how to negotiate Shabbat observance. Turell told ESPN that, if drafted, he “plans on playing on Shabbat and walking to the gym.” Turell will not interrupt Shabbat by driving in a car or flying on an airplane.

In the past, celebrated Jewish athletes who were not necessarily observant took a strict stand by sitting out of competition altogether on Judaism’s holiest days. Now, as the discussion has turned from the expectations of major Jewish sports figures to the specific needs of Orthodox Jewish athletes, the issue has shifted from once-a-year Yom Kippur observance to weekly Shabbat practice.

Turell’s intention to play basketball on Shabbat is emblematic of a reorientation in American Jewish life. In the past, American Jews comfortably compartmentalized their dual identities, sometimes compelled to choose one over the other. The new emphasis focuses on a coalescence into a single identity, to find a compromise that allows Jewish athletes to embrace both sides of themselves. It suggests that America’s Jews ought to eliminate barriers, within reason, to demonstrate the agreement between their faith and American life.

The best-known encounters between sports and religious observance center on Yom Kippur. In 1934, when his team was trying to capture the pennant, Detroit Tigers first baseman Hank Greenberg sat out on Yom Kippur. The slugger had long since abandoned strict Jewish observance but fans, rabbis, and his parents had cajoled the future Hall of Famer to take the day off, and Greenberg relented to the pressure. It likely helped that the Tigers had several more wins than the Yankees and had the pennant locked up.

Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax is the other larger-than-life example of Yom Kippur observance. In 1965, the Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher swapped starts with fellow star pitcher Don Drysdale to open the World Series. Drysdale was a worthy replacement, and the switch still gave Koufax three opportunities to pitch in a seven-game series against the Minnesota Twins. Drysdale and Koufax lost the first two games. But Koufax rebounded and held the Twins scoreless in his two subsequent starts. The Dodgers won the World Series and Koufax was named Most Valuable Player.

The pressure on Koufax to sit out on the holy day was self-imposed; even though he was not Orthodox, Koufax understood that Yom Kippur is Judaism’s most sacred annual occasion. “I’m Jewish,” Koufax explained to a Los Angeles rabbi. “I’m a role model.” It was for
him an all-or-nothing decision, an effort to compartmentalize his relationship to American sports and his Jewish identity.

Greenberg and Koufax sat out on Yom Kippur to publicly demonstrate that they held onto two distinct identities. American baseball conflicted with Yom Kippur, so Greenberg and Koufax had to choose one over the other.

Their reluctance to find a middle ground highlighted both identities even though one was surrendered for the other. They have remained a symbol of what Jews in the United States do on their holy days. They do not compromise. They withdraw from the public scene. They sit.

This all-or-nothing approach that Greenberg and Koufax made famous has persisted. But the Orthodox stance on observing Shabbat—something neither Greenberg nor Koufax did—has expanded the number of potential calendar conflicts 50-fold. It’s one thing to sit out one or two games in your year; it’s quite another to navigate weekly religious observance.

It’s an issue that came to public light more than 50 years ago, in a 1971 episode of The Bill Cosby Show on TV called “The Saturday Game,” which centered on an Orthodox baseball player wrestling with whether to play on Shabbat. (Cosby, as the coach, advises the young athlete to sit out the Saturday contest.) It became a real-life issue more recently: In 1999, the University of Maryland offered Tamir Goodman, the so-called “Jewish Jordan,” an athletic scholarship to play for the basketball team. Back then, the Terrapins were a top-tier program and would win the NCAA championship in 2002. The school had tried to accommodate Goodman’s religious practices by removing as many Saturday games as possible from their schedule but could not make it work. Instead, Goodman accepted an offer from nearby Towson University, which allowed him to play basketball six days a week and stay off the court on Saturdays.

Other examples grabbed headlines. In February 2001, the Illinois High School Association told Ida Crown Jewish Academy that it would not reschedule the regional final playoff game should the 22-1 Aces defeat their opponents in the basketball tournament’s semifinal round. The championship was slated for Friday evening, directly after sunset, the onset of Shabbat. In the end, Holy Trinity defeated Ida Crown and the scheduling conflict became a nonissue. However, it is telling that during the commotion the school did not weigh a middle-ground option: Ida Crown’s principal did not suggest staying at a nearby hotel and walking to the gym, even though that would have obviated the major hurdles for Shabbat observance. (While there is rabbinic debate over the traditional prohibitions against “work,” which includes the use of electricity and driving.)

On some occasions, Orthodox Jews have pulled political and legal levers to ensure that their programs do not conflict with Shabbat observance. These examples represent the other side of the all-or-nothing perspective on Shabbat competition: urging others to rearrange the schedule to permit Orthodox Jews’ full participation.

Extracurricular debate teams have also entered this political arena. In 2005, the heads of Teaneck, New Jersey’s Torah Academy of Bergen County protested that the National High School Mock Trial Championship in Charlotte, North Carolina, would not accommodate its students’ Shabbat needs. The school successfully lobbied its case, with support from the New Jersey and North Carolina bar associations. But four years later, the same championship told Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts, that it could not avoid scheduling debates on Shabbat; organizers, furious that the bar associations had intervened, would not make accommodations. The Maimonides students protested: “Shabbat is not at all voluntary and not something you can compromise on,” explained co-captain Leah Sarna. The students’ parents enlisted noted civil rights attorneys Nathan and Alyza Lewin, who petitioned the U.S. Justice Department to issue a letter to the competition administrators that since their agency received federal funds, forcing debaters to compete on Shabbat was discriminatory on the basis of religion. The letter applied the needed pressure to convince state judicial leaders to intervene.

In 2012, the Houston-based Robert M. Beren Academy basketball team challenged the Texas private school athletic league to change a semifinal match from Saturday to Friday. The organizers initially denied the request. The school made it clear to The New York Times that there was no room to compromise: “The sacred mission [of Shabbat observance] will trump excellence in the secular world.” An 11-hour legal challenge by the Lewins compelled the league to change its mind, based on a precedent by the league to accommodate a Seventh Day Adventist school. Being on the winning side reconfirmed the Houston school’s all-or-nothing position. “The experience gave us the opportunity to show how much we care about religion,” said a team member. “The way you make something special is to sacrifice something that is much greater for it.”

Turell’s decision, then, to find a way to compromise and compete on Shabbat reverses a longstanding trend. Of course, the financial stakes for Turell, even if he must settle for a semi-pro basketball career, are significantly higher than any of the episodes rehearsed above. The heightened perspective of Shabbat as an all-or-nothing approach offers room to find a workaround.

Yet, there’s more to this than money and sparkplugs: more than ever, the desire of Jews (and Orthodox Jews, in particular) to prove to themselves and others that their faith and culture are fully compatible with American norms. One of the more effective ways to demonstrate this is through symbolic exemplars whose actions are more visible than the rank and file.

Turell is one of two recent examples. In 2021, Jacob Steinmetz, a graduate of an Orthodox high school in Long Island, told reporters after being selected by the Arizona Diamondbacks in the third round of the Major League Baseball draft that he intends to pitch on
My Grandfather’s Second Wife

Finding the woman who’d been left out of our family’s history helped me to reconnect with my father, my family, and my past

BY MICHAEL VISONTAY

My paternal grandfather, Pali Visontay, had three wives but the family only spoke about two of them. The first, Sara, was blessed with an easy charm, a sharp wit, and a hearty appetite. She was murdered in Auschwitz in the prime of her life. Sara’s tragic experience is a cornerstone of our family history and her memory is revered. Her name has been memorialized on a plaque at our family synagogue in Sydney, archived by the Sydney Jewish Museum, and imprinted on the grandchildren. A sepia-toned photo from my grandparents’ wedding stands proudly in our hallway while I was growing up.

Pali’s third wife, Roszi, entered his life a decade later, when she walked into the delicatessen he owned in Kings Cross, Sydney’s bohemian neighborhood, just a few years after he had arrived in Australia from Hungary. Unlike Sara, Roszi had little time for food and cooking, which made her a poor fit for a delicatessen owner. She was “artistic”—a fashion designer who loved clothes, oversized sunglasses, and dressed like a proto-vera Iris Apfel. Roszi created an émigré salon of Impressionist imitators in her sunroom, and later turned her hand to writing a saucy memoir. The walls of their house were full of Cézanne copies; the conflict in their marriage was original. Though she is long dead, the legend of her colorful life gives us plenty to laugh about at family get-togethers.

In between Sara and Roszi came Olga, who was all but invisible. We never saw a photo of her or learned how she and Pali met, what she was like, or how she died. Unlike Sara, whose name lives on, and Roszi, who was buried alongside the rest of our family, Olga was farewelled with an isolated grave in a separate cemetery on the other side of the city.

I first saw it five years ago. I’m 62 years old; that’s how long it’s taken me to start interrogating her absence. When I set eyes on the grave, the plot speckled with weeds and conspicuously neglected, it took some time to accept that she was a member of my family. The surname was the same but the overall inscription was almost absent of intimacy. The headstone, its weathered typeface hard to read, carries a brief “vale”—In loving memory of my dear wife, Olga Visontay—followed by the date of her death. That’s it. No birth date, no mention of my grandfather Pali or his only child, my father, Ivan. Neither of them wanted to claim her.

After Pali passed away, it was as if my father spent his life willing Olga out of existence. Only my mother, Eva, when pressed, would mention her in the vaguest terms: She’d come to Australia with Pali from Hungary, died soon after they arrived, and there was some murky problem arising from her will.

My parents are both gone now: my father 10 years ago; my mother less than two. Now it’s just my brother and me, their two sons. COVID has given me time to sift through documents that had been sitting in strongboxes and files, waiting to be explored. My father was sentimental and kept meticulous records of their life together. Some
papers were yellowed and thin, others were stiff like parchment. They included the only existing letter written by his mother and father together (“Istvan, thank God, is a giant of a young man, he will turn 12 this November. My son loves his stomach just as before. At Passover he polished off ten large matzo balls with ease,” Pali wrote), a psychologist’s assessment of Ivan’s postwar mental health (“an intelligent, technically-leaning, imaginative, ambitious, well-meaning but depressed youth”), the bill for the Rolls Royce Ivan hired for his wedding, the receipts from the motel in Surfers Paradise where my parents stayed on their honeymoon, and even an inventory of the furniture made for them by my mother’s uncle, a prominent cabinetmaker. An extraordinary trove of family memories.

In among the shoeboxes and folders, I found details here and there of Olga—a marriage certificate, travel documents, passport photos, rental addresses from when she, my grandfather, and father arrived in Sydney. Tidbits, nothing to shed light on her personality. In the few snaps I found of her with Pali on the ship that brought them here, there was not even the hint of a smile. Her face had the stern, granite look typical of postwar documents. Life did not seem to have been kind to her.

In the course of my search, I spied an envelope with a bunch of thick papers. Inside was a court order, typed on an envelope with a bunch of thick papers. It described him as “an international figure in the field of rare books and manuscripts,” who mastered eight languages in his youth but arrived in Boston from Hungary, age 30, unable to speak a word of English. From this inauspicious beginning, he forged a celebrated reputation as a bookseller in New York, highlighted by the purchase and sale of a Gutenberg Bible, as well as a jeweled edition of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

Wells’ nephews and fellow beneficiaries contested Olga’s will. One of them, Francis (“Frank”) Dobo—a close friend of the Hungarian arthouse photographers Brassai and Andre Kertesz, as well as of novelists, Henry Miller, Celine, and Raymond Queneau—also received an obituary in The New York Times, which unointed him as “the epitome of a 20th-century intellectual.”

From having no background at all, Olga was now endowed with a large, fascinating family. My interest piqued, I tracked down Frank Dobo’s son, who, when it turned out, inherited his father’s photography bug. Michael Dobo achieved celebrity as a rock ’n’ roll photographer in the 1960s-’70s, worked as Annie Leibovitz’s assistant at Rolling Stone, had photos published in Time, Life, and The New York Times, and shot iconic portraits of Frank Zappa, Bob Marley, and other music icons. I left a rambling voicemail for him at his home in Connecticut and, to my surprise, he emailed me the next day.

Now the story moved to a different level. Michael told me to email a Hungarian historian named György Nemeth, who lived in Manchester, England, and had been in contact with him. György was researching a group of 20th-century Hungarian photographers for a Hungarian photographic institute, Andre Kertesz and Brassai among them. Michael had inherited their correspondence with his father and György was hoping to get access to the letters.

A few emails and a torrent of documents later, György was my new best friend. Marooned in Manchester by the pandemic, and with vast Jewish Hungarian databases on his hard drive, he cheerfully pieced together Olga’s family and background for me.

She was born in Vac, provincial Hungary, in 1900, the younger of two sisters. Their father, Antal Illlofszky, was a timber merchant who died when Olga was just 13 years old. The family moved to Gyöngyös (my father’s hometown) an hour’s drive from Budapest, and she married Karoly Weisz, a wine merchant there, in 1925. The couple had no children. Olga’s mother, Regina (nee Weiss), died in 1929, and in 1944, her husband was deported to Auschwitz; he did not return.

As I cross-checked György’s documents, an extraordinary coincidence emerged. The records stated that Olga’s husband, Karoly, and Pali’s wife, Sara, had died on the same day in Auschwitz. Could that be true? I emailed György, who shot back a historian’s answer. “The Jewish population from Gyöngyös was rounded up [in May] and put in a town 40 km away. The transport left for Auschwitz on June 12 and arrived there on June 14. Around 2,000 people were collected from the town; that’s probably one transport,” he wrote. “Olga’s husband and your grandmother were on the same train.”

I was flabbergasted. And there was more. Olga’s older sister Margit also died in a concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen, which meant Olga was the sole member of her immediate family to survive the war. The big picture was that her uncle, Gabriel Wells, the antiquarian bookseller, made a fortune in New York while his five siblings struggled back in war-torn Europe. Wells had no children, and when he died in 1946, he left the estate to his siblings, most of whom had perished in the camps, or to their offspring. Olga’s sister was first in line for the inheritance but since she passed away before Wells did, it went to Olga.

Why does any of this matter? Well, money matters a lot when you’re rebuilding your life in a new country. When Pali met Olga, little did he know she would soon become a wealthy woman. When the family sailed from Genoa to Australia in 1952, they did not arrive
as impoverished refugees, as many Jews did. Olga's inheritance, which she had received the year before they landed in Sydney, enabled Pali and Ivan to start the delicatessen at Kings Cross, which they called the Minerva (after the popular theater around the corner), reviving the family business they had run in Győngyös.

Although their decision to buy the shop seems obvious in hindsight, it was not the original plan. When I was a young boy, my father told me the family intended to migrate to America after the war, not Australia. He had been accepted into Rutgers University to study electrical engineering, thanks to a family connection. I never thought to ask him for more details. Our life was in Sydney, which was all that mattered. It now seems clear that the “family connection” was Olga, and this contained a cruel irony.

Ivan, who was 22 at the time, was given a U.S. visa but Pali and Olga were not. That put America out of the question. Ivan sacrificed the university offer in order to stay with Pali and they looked around for another country, also far from Europe, that would accept them. After hearing other people mention Australia, they made inquiries and received landing permits without any trouble. Within a year, father and son were standing behind the counter again, wearing white aprons.

Olga’s inheritance was $21,000, which seems modest by today’s standards. But it was more than enough to bankroll the purchase of the delicatessen business (and three times what my father paid for his first house a few years later). Ivan would become, like many postwar migrants, a workaholic in an effort to rebuild his life. He put in long hours, barely took a holiday, and was rewarded with a thriving business. In the 1970s, the shop even received a visit from Colonel Sanders, who was impressed by the “Mothers Own” chicken Ivan marketed to compete with the Colonel’s famous Kentucky Fried Chicken, with its 11 herbs and spices. Ivan later installed a commercial fridge in our family garage and drove the cheese and smallgoods home each day to put them in cold storage.

“Sara and Ivan were met at the gates by Dr. Josef Mengele, who sent mother and son in opposite directions.”

Throughout my childhood, the family car reeked of gorgonzola.

Olga, the stepmother he refused to publicly discuss, thus emerged as the financial rock on which he rebuilt his life. Sadly for her, she never got to enjoy the fruits of her inheritance. Just as things were looking up for the family, Olga died suddenly from a stroke, a mere 18 months after they had arrived in Australia. According to the Australian probate, Olga did not have a will, allowing Frank Dobo and his cousin to contest her estate. They claimed Olga's aunt (Frank's mother) had “advanced her money” after the war, and demanded that Pali and Ivan repay a portion of her estate, $4,000, in compensation. (I can never prove it but my guess is the “money advanced” was to help Olga with the Rutgers application for Ivan.)

The unexpected financial hole compounded the debt they had from starting the business, creating a huge burden for them. Pali and Ivan had to work seven days a week, 12 hours a day, for five years to get back on their feet. “Five years later, we were back to square one. We lost five years,” Ivan said, in an interview as part of a survivors’ history project with the Sydney Jewish Museum, adding that the financial burden even delayed his marriage to my mother.

While those five years of hardship scarred their memory, they were not the only reason for Ivan's hostility toward his stepmother. The lack of a will was surely an oversight: Olga would not have expected to die so young, at age 52, nor so soon after arriving. I always believed the underlying cause was much harder for him to acknowledge.

Even now, this is not easy to write. During the war, Pali was deported to Mauthausen concentration camp before Sara and Ivan—who was then 14 years old—were sent to Auschwitz. Pali came home first, and while trying to get news of their whereabouts, started working in the delicatessen, which was intact and had not been confiscated. Ivan returned home, alone, two months later, in 1945. Pali did not have the stomach to ask Ivan what happened to Sara, and Ivan could not bring himself to broach it with him. It was two days before Pali finally mustered the courage. Ivan told him, and then did not speak of it again for nearly 40 years, until the interview with the Jewish Museum, whose distance from the family made it easier for him to open up about such painful memories.

Sara and Ivan were met at the gates by Dr. Josef Mengele, who sent mother and son in opposite directions. Ivan was deloused, tattooed, and sent to work at the crematoria, sorting the clothes and valuables of the dead. Three days later, he saw his mother’s corpse lying on the top of a pile of bodies outside the ovens. It was an experience so devastating that he was unable to talk about it for many years, instead saying in general terms that after the “selection,” he never saw his mother again. The scene is seared in our family’s collective memory; it is hard to imagine how a 14-year-old boy would deal with such an experience.

The psychological report I found in my father’s papers, written by a psychologist after he finished high school in 1948, described him as follows: “He is a tall, well built, strong boy. An only child. He has no friends and he often feels this lack. He is strongly marked by the deportation to Auschwitz. He is strongly dejected by the death of his mother who died during the deportation. He complains that he encounters malice everywhere even now, so he
trusts nobody. This distrust manifests itself in his being very cautious in his statements, deliberating what he says. He misses his mother a lot to whom, it appears, he was strongly attached.”

Pali’s marriage to Olga, in 1946, barely a year after Sara’s death, must have felt like an act of unspeakable betrayal to my father, after what he had gone through, and I suspect that it was much easier for him to blame Olga for reinforcing the loss of his real mother than to blame his own father for their overly hasty marriage. After losing his mother in Auschwitz, Ivan felt a singular bond with his widowed father, united as they were in a private grief. Olga’s presence drove a wedge through their intimacy. Ivan felt so alienated that when the family later decided to leave Hungary after the communists took over, he went over the border to Austria ahead of them, escaping through the mountains to settle in Vienna and form his own jazz band, which had the memorable name of Jose Dymont. Although Pali and Olga followed six months later, he had been prepared to risk not seeing his father again.

It was not until later in life, when Ivan recorded his survivor’s testimony for Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation, in 1995, that he spoke publicly about Olga. “We did not own any property before the war. The house where we used to live was hit by a bomb,” he said. “We had to find accommodation; there was a Jewish woman whose husband had died during the Holocaust but she survived by hiding somewhere. And she had a house. My father and I rented a room there. About a year later, my father told me that life was rather lonely for him and he supposed that I would understand he was going to marry this lady, which he did.”

That was all he said. He never mentioned her by name. The absence of any further reference to the marriage rang loud in my ears.

György had one more surprise in store. After a few months of silence, he messaged me, this time with a request of his own. Through his research into Kertesz and Brasai, he was put in touch with a Hungarian woman who had a second cousin living in Sydney, and as a favor for the help she had given him in his research, wondered if I might find him. As it happened, the man lived quite close to me and was easy to track down. I explained György’s request, he confirmed that he was indeed related to the woman and undertook to send a reply, and then told me he knew my father from the old days. “We came out on the same ship together, from Genoa,” he said gently. I could not believe it. After all these years, a living connection to Ivan’s youth. He could hear the excitement in my voice as we arranged to meet at his house. Although by now in his mid-80s, he still exuded a warm urbanity. I felt instantly comfortable with him, perhaps because he reminded me of so many family friends from my childhood.

I had brought my father’s photo album of his journey from Genoa, hoping he could shed light on some of the other passengers. As he leafed through the album, his face suddenly lit up. “That’s me, and my father,” he beamed, pointing to a couple of photos showing him as a teen with his father, together with Pali and Ivan. What about Olga? I asked.

Yes, he remembered Pali had a wife; his brow furrowed as he squinted to point her out in another photo on the page. “Olga was small, not beautiful or friendly; and it was very clear by Ivan’s behavior that Olga was not his mother,” he began. “Your father and grandfather seemed like a team and she seemed apart. She did not have what I would call a strong personality. Nor strong opinions. She spoke little, kept her thoughts to herself. I assumed she had no [other] children, which would explain her withdrawn personality.”

Clearly, Olga was never the life of the party. Still, after her death, Pali missed female companionship. Six months later, Roszi told the man behind the counter she had heard the owner was one of seven Weiszmann brothers born into a prominent merchant family who lived near her hometown in Hungary. Pali confirmed he was one of the brothers, and shared the tragic news that most of his siblings had perished in the camps.

Here I quote from her memoir:

“And Pali? What became of Pali?”
“Why, I am Pali,” he replied.

“Olga was small, not beautiful or friendly; and it was very clear by Ivan’s behavior that Olga was not his mother.”

community

Our shared Jewish life, at tabletmag.com/sections/community
Roszi’s face brightened. “Good
God! What a change there has been
in the handsome young man I used
to know.”

“Who are you to say this? You’re no
beauty yourself!”

“Maybe you don’t remember me,
but I still remember the agile, hand-
some 20-year-old boy who I knew
well a long, long time ago when I was
a young girl.”
Pali suddenly hit his head with his
hand. “Oh! I don’t remember you at all
but I do remember your daring bathing
costume!”

From this inauspicious beginning,
the romance was reborn. During their
courtship, Roszi learned more about Pali’s life, she realized that for nearly
two years they had been living on the
same apartment block in the beachside
suburb of Bondi—-in those days a mecca
for Eastern European refugees—
without ever meeting each other. The
landlord had told Roszi about the other
Hungarian tenant but because Pali had
changed his name from Weiszmann to
Visontay (after the war many Hungarian Jews changed their Jewish-sound-
ing surnames to Hungarian ones), she
thought it was just some other Hungarian Jewish immigrant—not her Pali.

Within a year of Olga’s death, Roszi
became Pali’s third wife. Where Olga
was quiet and withdrawn, Roszi was
willful and headstrong. The example
that sticks in my mind occurred many
years later, when my brother Garry
had his bar mitzvah, a joyous occasion reflected in the photos taken at
the reception. My parents proudly
passed them on to Pali and Roszi to
inspect and choose duplicates. When
the photos came back, Roszi had cut
herself out of every shot she appeared
in because she didn’t like the way she
looked, then stuck them back together
with sticky tape. My mother was be-
side herself.

Roszi didn’t bat an eyelid. She ended
up conceding that Pali was right about
her looks, if not her personality. She also
delivered an unwitting symmetry to his
three wives: The first was ripped out of
the family, the second was willed out,
and the third literally tried to cut herself
out but failed.

The erasure of Olga’s life, and my
retrieval of it, raises, for me, one fi-
nal question: Why did I feel com-
pelled to go on such a quest? Why
turn a historical family footnote into
a front-page story? While my mother
was still alive, I had access to my fa-
ther’s life and memory through her.
I could have asked her about Olga or
any subject whenever I wanted. With
her death two years ago, my father’s
life, which lived on through her, was
finally out of reach. I started mourning
the loss of him all over again. See-
ing that court order in the shoebox
was an invitation to somehow bring
him to life again, to immerse myself
in his story and revisit that period
when I was a young boy, surrounded
by grandparents and the echo of war-
torn Europe.

As I waded through the past, Olga
moved out of the shadows and became
a real person, one who dealt with per-
sonal loss—the agent of her own life
who helped my father and grandfather
rebuild theirs. I got to know her a lit-
tle and our family history is richer for
it. My father would have winced and
squirmed at what I have written. It’s the
conversation we never had. The loss will
always be mine.

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**FOOD**

**The Sour Joys of Sumac**

This tart and tangy Middle Eastern staple can brighten up everything from
soups and dressings to salads and entrees—and even a cocktail or two

*BY PAOLA GAVIN*

When many Americans hear the word “sumac,” the next word that
comes to mind is “poison”: A leafy
shrub with white berries, poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), causes itchy
rashes. But there’s another sumac that’s
been known across much of the world
for centuries, and this one only tickles
taste buds.

Sumac is one of the tastiest and most
used souring agents in the Middle East,
with a deliciously tart, tangy flavor sim-
ilar to, but not as strong as, lemon juice.
It is made from the dried berries of the
sumac bush (*Rhus coriaria*)—som-
times called Sicilian sumac—and is a
native of the Eastern Mediterranean,
the Caucasus, and Iran; other varieties
are found in Asia, the Pacific, and North
America. The word sumac derives from
the Aramaic *summaq*, meaning “dark
red,” although the exact color of su-
mac can vary from bright red to deep
burgundy according to the season and
where it is grown.

Sumac berries may be dried and
used whole, soaked, or ground into a
coarse powder that is used to flavor all
types of breads, rice pilafs, salad dress-
ings, dips, soups, beans, and vegetable
dishes. In southern Anatolia, sumac
berries are traditionally used to make
a kind of cordial or pink lemonade or
a refreshing tea. Sumac is widely used
in Iran, Armenia, Syria, and Lebanon,
as well as modern-day Israel, where it
is sprinkled on everything from fried
eggs, fish, poultry, and kebabs to falafel,
hummus, and yogurt. Even people who
elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn’t between left and right. It’s the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn’t between left and right. It’s the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...**
Spinach and Feta Triangles with Pine Nuts and Sumac

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

1 lb fresh spinach
2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
2 scallions, trimmed and finely chopped
½ cup crumbled feta cheese
3 Tbsp pine nuts
2 tsp ground sumac
¼ tsp ground Ceylon cinnamon
Pinch ground cloves
Grating of nutmeg
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper
7 or 8 large sheets fresh or thawed frozen filo pastry
Extra virgin olive oil, for brushing
3 or 4 Tbsp sesame seeds, for dusting

PREPARATION

Step 1
To make the filling, wash the spinach and cook in a covered saucepan for 5 to 7 minutes or until tender. The water clinging to the leaves is sufficient to prevent scorching. Drain well, removing as much water as you can, then chop coarsely.

Step 2
Heat 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil in a large frying pan and add the onion and scallions. Cook over a moderate heat until tender. Add the spinach and simmer for 1 or 2 minutes. Place the feta cheese in a mixing bowl and mash well with a fork. Add the spinach mixture, pine nuts, sumac, and spices and season with salt and black pepper.

Step 3
Cut the filo pastry into strips about 3 inches wide x 12 inches long. Place in a pile and cover with a cloth to prevent them drying out. Take one strip of filo pastry and brush lightly with olive oil. Place a heaping teaspoonful of the filling over the bottom end of the pastry strip. Carefully lift up the right-hand corner and fold over to make a triangle. Fold over and over again until you have reached the top. Repeat with the remaining filo strips and filling.

Step 4
Place the filo triangles side by side on a greased baking sheet and brush the tops lightly with olive oil. Sprinkle with sesame seeds and bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 15-20 minutes or until crisp and golden. Serve hot, warm, or at room temperature.

Yield: about 36 pastries

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