

# THE TAB

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### COMMUNITY

# An Ivy League Powwow

Dartmouth grapples with its original mission to educate Native American and indigenous students

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

**O**n May 13, Dartmouth College celebrated 51 years of its Department of Native American and Indigenous Studies, along with its annual Powwow—one of several similar celebrations that began showing up at other American universities in the 1960s and '70s, as the movement for Native American rights gained prominence. But unlike other schools, Dartmouth was founded in 1769 with a royal charter specifically “for the education and instruction of Youth of the Indian Tribes in this Land.” The intention was not to educate these young men for their own sake; instruction was to be of a Christianizing, and therefore European, character. Moreover, the charter also provided for the education “of English Youth and any others,” and in the two centuries that followed, Dartmouth focused decidedly more on these latter two groups. Until the establishment of the new department, the college graduated only 19 recorded Native American students in the two centuries since its founding.

Today, Dartmouth continues to grapple with its history, making strides to include the student population it was originally created to serve, as well as indigenous students from other parts of the world. Since the 1970s, in addition to a Department of Native American and Indigenous Studies, Dartmouth also boasts a Native American Program for its students. The latter is a cultural program that offers a Native American House student residence, hosts both an annual spring Powwow and Hawaiian and Pacific Islander luau, and bookends the Dartmouth experience for Native and indigenous students with a separate pre-orientation and graduation ceremony. Although the Native American faith landscape represents a range of beliefs and practices, initiatives like Dartmouth’s Native American Program that evoke, adapt, and preserve traditional spiritual practices offer something distinct to Native and indigenous students that may influence their overall well-being at the school and beyond.

The college has graduated about 1,200 Native and indigenous students from a variety of tribes since the recommitment to them in 1970. After Dartmouth College commencement exercises this Saturday, June 11, the Native American Program will hold its annual Native American and indigenous graduation ceremony for the class of 2023. This

ceremony, overlaid with spiritual and cultural significance, reflects a cultural exchange between tribal groups that took shape in reaction to both official and unofficial external policies of forced migration and acculturation throughout American history.

Congregationalist minister Eleazer Wheelock founded Dartmouth College and fundraised for the school with the help of one of his first students, a member of the Mohegan tribe and ordained minister named Samson Occom. However, substantial and intentional efforts to include Native Americans would not begin in earnest until the early 1970s; 1972 saw the creation of what was then called the Native American Studies Program, and inaugurated a conscientious effort to include Native American students.

The numbers tell a story of progress for the college in the decades since it recommitted to its founding principles. Of the 1,125 students in Dartmouth's class of 2026, 4% are Native American and indigenous, representing 26 tribal nations and communities. The class of 2027 is on track to have a record number of self-identified Native American and indigenous students: 64 incoming students (the previous record is 62 for the class of 2020, according to Associate Director of Admissions Steven Abbott, speaking at the Native American Alumni Association of Dartmouth annual meeting last month). That's a higher rate than the national average of Native American students at institutions of higher learning, according to recent numbers from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute. Native Americans made up less than 1% of the entire population enrolled in postsecondary education in the fall of 2020; 22% of Native Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in college, compared to 40% of the U.S. population overall in that age cohort.

College and graduate school enrollment among Native Americans has been on the decline since 2010, and completion rates within six years (42%) are lower than the overall national average of over 60%.

Mae Drake Hueston, assistant director

of the college's Native American Program—and a Dartmouth alumna—said in an interview: “Historically, Native students didn't do well in academic settings, mostly because they were coming from underresourced tribal schools. And when you look at the conditions on reservations, usually they did not get a lot of the funding that was necessary to create really good infrastructure.”

However, within a decade of graduating, Native American students who do complete college tend to enjoy similar outcomes in terms of earnings and wealth accumulation as the national average, according to a 2014 article for the *Journal of American Indian Education*. The authors noted that “many Native American cultures do express collectivism as a major principle of association and learning. Few Native American students grow up in the tradition of individualism and self-interest,” and indeed for many, higher education represents an opportunity to contribute to their community of origin.

“Powwow brings so much to campus,” said student organizer Shelby Snyder, member of the Navajo and South Ute nations, in a 2022 alumni news article about last year's 50th anniversary Powwow. “The steps you take while dancing in the arena are also prayers for healing. You're dancing for those who can't dance—those who have passed away, those who are sick right now. You're thinking of all of that collectively, and it's such a healing space. I think that's what we really tried to focus on this year—community healing and community bonding.”

The *Journal* article, a literature review, focuses on research into the benefit of Native American clubs at what they term “predominantly white institutions,” or PWIs, saying that they offer rituals that are an expression of culture, which can ground students while putting them in contact with others whose experience may be similar to theirs. As Native American students navigate the culture of competitive individualism that is often pervasive at PWIs, connection to a community that emphasizes cooperation and collectivism can have a spiritually invigorating effect.

And an academic one.

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The literature review also found a positive correlation between higher GPAs and Native American students who “became more receptive to social activities,” forming friendship networks that kept them in check academically, and which ultimately connected them more to the institution as a whole. However, that sense of belonging did not necessarily translate into remaining in college past the first year, even for those predisposed to be social joiners. The authors contend that schools lacking Native American clubs or organizations do not offer the kind of cultural reinforcement that could help Native American students contextualize themselves within their new environment. Particularly at PWIs, the authors found the advantage offered by Native American student organizations is the opportunity to engage and become involved with an institution—something that research shows is key to retention—“without threatening their own cultural practices and beliefs.”

For a population that has been subjected to forced campaigns of assimilation, cultural markers and historical artifacts can carry particular resonance.

A variety of tribes are represented at Dartmouth and this year, in addition to traditional drum music, songs, and dances, the annual Powwow also featured a commemoration of the return of Samson Occom’s papers to the Mohegan tribe. In the early 1760s, when Wheelock sent Occom to England to raise the money to start Dartmouth (which he did to the tune of 12,000 pounds, or roughly 3 million pounds—or \$3.7 million—in today’s money), the idea was that the polymath and ordained Native American minister would exemplify “what an English education could do.”

That’s according to Colin Calloway, professor of history and Native American studies at Dartmouth. Education meant civilizing: teaching reading and writing in English, “but also instill in them the virtues of Christianity,” he said. Calloway said Occom stayed in England for two years, delivering hundreds of sermons to packed congregations there and in Scotland. But Occom and Wheelock fell out after Dartmouth’s

**“For a population that has been subjected to forced campaigns of assimilation, cultural markers and historical artifacts can carry particular resonance.”**

founding, as Occom felt used by the latter, who had ultimately spent the funds Occom raised for the education of Native youth to create yet another white educational institution (Hueston said the revenue brought by wealthy Christian males was a major driver for the college to reorient away from its stated mission so quickly). Somewhat paradoxically, what attempts the school did make to recruit Native Americans in the 18th and 19th century were primarily limited to tribes that had already been Christianized, or had some history of intermarriage or having children with white settlers.

“The definition of education at that time was how do we civilize, acculturate, and make these Natives no longer be Native, but for them to be as non-Native as we possibly could make them?” said Hueston. “Right now, the goal of student affairs offices, which is what I am, what we are, our goal is not to acculturate, and it is not to assimilate, it is to support the students to remain committed to their Native identity,” while they pursue “a quality education.” This is a trend at Dartmouth and at other institutions of higher education she said, that is “kind of counter to why [Dartmouth] was created in the first place.”

Calloway was present at the return of Occom’s papers to the Mohegan

tribe, which he said occurred in front of the Mohegan tribal church in Connecticut in April of last year. Built on land that once belonged to Samson Occom’s sister, it was a backdrop replete with symbolism. The sole piece of land in continuous ownership by the tribe, the church was founded as a Congregationalist meeting house in 1831 and it remains, according to the Mohegan tribal website, “an active tribal institution for religious, political, educational, and social functions.” Its continuous possession by the Mohegans proved to be a crucial consideration in granting the tribe federal recognition in 1994, which requires proof of continued, uninterrupted existence of a Native community. This is often difficult, Calloway said, for New England tribes, who “often survived by keeping their heads down.” An eagle feather, a sacred symbol to the Mohegans of purity and idealism, appears above the church’s cross.

The return of the papers, said Calloway, “was more than a gesture. It was the right thing to do.” Dartmouth President Philip J. Hanlon recalled this event in his remarks at this year’s Powwow, calling it a “deeply meaningful moment.”

While many colleges with Native American student populations have powwows, Hueston described particularly robust institutional support for Dartmouth’s. The offices of the president and dean of the college, the DEI office, the Department for Native American and Indigenous Studies, alumni, and student groups all facilitate the annual event.

The college’s use of the word powwow may be surprising to some, given its historical association with the commodified, stereotyped spectacle of “Wild West” shows, popular entertainments for non-Native audiences that featured Native American dancers and performers. The term was popularized when it began to show up in early-20th-century U.S. newspaper ads for such shows, but its origins go back even earlier. “Powwow” derives from an Algonquian word, *Pau Wau*, which referred to medicine men, but which New England colonists Anglicized and repurposed as a term for a meeting of these men.

The 20th-century powwow evolved in part out of intertribal meetings and collaboration in the 19th century, the result of the U.S. government's forced migration of Plains Indians from various tribes. Rituals and dances were adapted and spread across the region to form intertribal ceremonies that functioned as reunions for separated families and communities. Yet another, later government relocation of Native Americans in the mid-20th century, intended to remove them from resource-rich lands to jobs in urban centers, caused still more cross-cultural exchange as disparate tribal cultures brushed up against each other, and the intertribal powwows of today came into existence. Concurrently, Native American veterans of the two world wars were reviving intertribal ceremonies to commemorate the fallen and the wartime service of Native American service members. And for the first time, higher education was accessible to Native American men through the GI Bill, which opened up other opportunities beyond the traditional fields of work in the church as ministers, which up until that point had been the primary option offered to those who pursued higher education.

With the evolution of the intertribal powwow, "no matter what culture you came from," said Hueston, "you could

be a part of a Native community," and have an opportunity to meet in Native dress and meet in large groups with other Native Americans safely, something that was prohibited in most cities and states for most of the year (the Independence Day holiday being the notable exception in many places, when social gatherings of Native Americans in Native dress were permitted). Over time, intertribal powwows became more formalized and solemnized, with rules about conduct, such as prohibitions on drinking and drug use, and maintaining distinctions between performers and spectators. Many of the songs and dances heard at powwows remain rooted in the tribal traditions of the Plains, even when tribes involved are not originally from that region of the country, since the contemporary powwow originated in the Western communities and cities to which many Native Americans were relocated by the U.S. government in the 19th century. Groups write and perform original songs in different languages to present at powwows—the more serious ones to perform during the powwow itself, and more lighthearted ones to play afterward in a more social context.

By her own admission, Hueston is not "a powwow person." The first powwow she ever attended was at Dartmouth as a student herself in 1983. "You kind of watch and observe and ask questions, and you become familiar with the general things that everybody knows," she said, "Like, when can I dance, and what do I do when I dance? How do you do the step? And everybody listens to the arena director, and you figure this out, and he tells you, you know, what to do, what's next, you listen to the emcee so you know the agenda and what's going on. You learn the styles of the dances by just watching and seeing who all goes out there when dances are called."

Various distinct traditions are called up during a powwow, but the emotional resonance is unifying for students. "I think in general they feel invisible when they're students on campus," Hueston said, and events like the powwow offer an opportunity to celebrate and honor what makes them different. "They miss home. Everyone here who is Native is pretty much far from home." The

powwow, then, is a chance to see others in traditional regalia in a context where it is familiar and affirming. For dancers at a powwow, the dances can function as celebrations or prayers. "For them to be able to do that here, it just makes the college belong to them more," she said.

Hueston was careful to state that tribes are very different from one another, and their traditions are not monolithic. "We all have various traditions that we use to celebrate," she said.

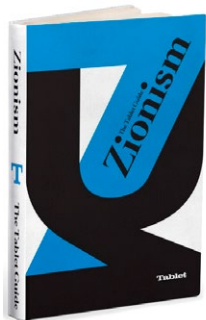
A common one, although by no means observed in every tribe, is the robing ceremony, also called a blanketing ceremony. At Dartmouth, it is a feature of the Native American and indigenous graduation ceremony that takes place later the same day as Dartmouth's commencement exercises. At a robing, someone who has attained an achievement—Hueston said it can be a birth, a graduation, or even winning an election—is honored by receiving a mantle of some type, usually a blanket, which is placed over their shoulders. At Dartmouth, the students are asked to invite someone they admire or honor to robe them. "It's sort of like a reciprocal honoring," she said.

This fusion of similar traditions across tribes into a shared ritual is a feature of Native American spirituality and religion, even before the arrival of European settlers. "Cultural boundaries were crossed repeatedly as different peoples shared their sacred stories, songs, dances, ceremonies, and foods with one another," asserts an article from Harvard's Pluralism Project on Native American religion, going on to state that religious ritual was frequently bound up in diplomatic and commercial exchange between tribes. After the arrival of Europeans, similar religious traditions and beliefs allowed tribes to coalesce into new alliances in response.

However, despite the similarities, there is no single "Native American religion," as such. Indigenous religions in the U.S., then, are often differentiated by geography and linguistic similarities, since many practices and beliefs evolved in response to the topography and its related customs (i.e., "the beliefs of the Great Plains" or "the Desert Southwest"). Even so, the variation within

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even these categorizations makes generalization difficult.

At Dartmouth in the 21st century, this spirit of cultural collaboration and syncretism continues to evolve.

Since its founding, the Native American Program has widened the scope of its programming to include Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, as well as students from the over 547 federally recognized Native American tribes. It is sometimes referred to now as “the Native and Indigenous Program,” even though the school website continues to use the original name. Academically, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Department also now includes areas of study related to indigenous peoples

from Central and South America, Russia, Scandinavia, Australia, and New Zealand. “There are a lot of common occurrences,” said Hueston. “We’re sort of at a point where, does the Native Program actually expand, so that it could include students who are indigenous? Because not everybody identifies as a Native American, or a Native Alaskan, or a Hawaiian Native. There are others that are part of indigenous groups that have that connection to their groups that may not be part of the United States.”

A more capacious, globally oriented iteration of the Native and Indigenous Program would open yet another chapter in Dartmouth’s complicated, but evolving relationship with its Native and indigenous students.

“It’s not a straightforward history,” said Calloway of Native American students at Dartmouth.

Noting that Dartmouth’s recognition of its responsibility to Native Americans coincided with the opening up of the college more generally to women and ethnic minorities in the 1970s, Hueston said, “I feel like this college now, today, really has a 51-year-old history.” ■

*This story is part of a series Tablet is publishing to promote religious literacy across different religious communities, supported by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.*

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## NEWS

# The Cyborgs Go to Washington

Who really benefits from the fearmongering calls for AI regulation?

BY HIRSH CHITKARA

**S**am Altman is not exactly what you’d call “a humanist.” The CEO of OpenAI (the company behind ChatGPT) believes we are designing our own evolutionary superiors through artificial intelligence. Humans, he says, can either embrace a cyborgian future or resign themselves to extinction. To that end, Altman plans on uploading his brain to the cloud. He even put a \$10,000 deposit on an embalming procedure that, while “100 percent fatal,” will also supposedly preserve his brain so that he can be resurrected via computer simulation. Only artificial intelligence will allow us to “fully understand the universe,” Altman wrote

last year. “Our unaided faculties are not good enough.”

This is all to say that Altman approaches AI regulation from a rather unsavory vantage point, assuming you still have a soft spot for those bumbling, pre-cyborgian apes we call humans. And yet, appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee in May, Altman played the role of benevolent technologist, concerned above all with helping the government promote human flourishing in the midst of technological upheaval. He reminded the senators on multiple occasions that OpenAI is a nonprofit, leaving out the part where investors can still receive a hundredfold return before the money makes its way back to the nonprofit arm. He also called for proactive regulations: It would be a “great idea”

to put scorecards on AI systems, “great for the world” to set up international AI safety standards, and “very important” for governments to align AI systems with social values. The senators either all fell for Altman’s schtick or, more likely, recognized his hustle as mutually beneficial. It was a chummy affair—the cherry on top of an enormously successful lobbying campaign that saw Altman meet with more than 100 members of Congress.

OpenAI achieved something undeniably remarkable in training silicon wafers to mimic human writing and thought. At the same time, nobody knows what comes next. Will it eliminate white-collar jobs? Upend journalism? Enchant incels with girlfriend simulators? Or, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb puts it, is ChatGPT just “a powerful cliché parroting engine?” Perhaps it can be all these things at once. After all, most desk jobs are tedious, most writing on the internet is cliché, and, to the lonely, even some small talk can be sustaining. *The New Yorker* may never use AI to write articles, but Axios and ESPN might, and BuzzFeed and Insider have already started. As for white-collar jobs, guesses range from labor market boom to fully automated corporate capitalism. IBM paused hiring for around 7,800 roles that the company said could be

replaced by AI, but the publicity around the move suggests IBM was also trying to advertise its own AI automation services. Meanwhile, LinkedIn abounds with self-styled AI influencers preying on fears of professional obsolescence.

While it isn't clear what Congress should do, everyone seems to agree it needs to do something. Yet our legislators have shown time and again they can't meaningfully regulate the tech industry, which spent over \$277 million on lobbying since 2020. Silicon Valley has only grown more powerful amid perpetual promises from Democrats and Republicans alike to rein in Big Tech. Every time something gets off the ground, the Big Tech lobbying apparatus ends up either killing the bill, neutering it, or appropriating it to serve their own interests. Last year, the industry managed to do a little of all three, banding together to pass a \$76 billion corporate subsidy package, block a bill targeting Big Tech's anti-competitive practices, and promote a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing federal privacy bill that would have preempted more comprehensive legislation in the states.

The hype cycle around AI is making matters worse. With Altman and his allies leading the dance, Silicon Valley can help write the rules of its own regulation in a way that lets both Washington and the tech industry claim they are "doing something" while further entrenching their own power. The national security state has already used the specter of AI disinformation to justify an escalation in their surveillance and censorship campaigns. Silicon Valley will be happy enough to play along, so long as it doesn't impact bottom lines. More likely, the resultant regulations will effectively designate a handful of "responsible" purveyors of AI, guaranteeing an oligopoly for Microsoft (which owns a sizable portion of OpenAI), Amazon, and Google.

To the disinformation brigade, generative AI represents an unprecedented threat warranting an unprecedented response. The CEO of NewsGuard called ChatGPT "the most powerful tool for spreading misinformation that has ever been on the internet." Obama outlined "frightening and profound"

**"The OpenAI CEO whose company created ChatGPT believes we are designing our own evolutionary superiors through artificial intelligence."**

implications for AI-generated disinformation on elections, democracy, and the legal system. Name-dropping on her podcast, Kara Swisher let slip that she had dinner with "Tony" Blinken, who was "very interested" in the State Department being part of an international effort to regulate AI. The imagined scenarios coming out of this sphere read like MSNBC fan fiction circa 2017: In the hands of Russia, China, and Iran, generative AI will be used to flood social media with authoritative-sounding disinformation, manipulating Americans at an unprecedented scale on issues such as vaccine efficacy and election procedures.

Because AI makes disinformation-generation ubiquitous and near-instantaneous, content moderation systems will need to be made ubiquitous and instantaneous, too—or so the thinking goes. Meta says it has been working on "new AI systems to automatically detect new variations of content that independent fact-checkers have already debunked." Advances in AI will make for more powerful and unintelligible content moderation systems, capable of picking up on the subtleties of speech and suppressing select viewpoints in near real time. Once these systems are in place, AI disinformation campaigns can serve as boogymen for clamping

down on ideological dissent. Researchers at Georgetown, for example, found that "after seeing five short messages written by GPT-3 and selected by humans, the percentage of survey respondents opposed to sanctions on China doubled." Their conclusion that GPT-3 is therefore a dangerous manipulation machine betrays a fundamental lack of faith in the critical thinking abilities of the general public. It also shows how an "AI manipulation campaign" can easily be conflated with espousing the wrong views.

AI makes for great cover in part because these scenarios are plausible, and to some extent already happening. In late March, the S&P 500 momentarily plunged after several prominent news aggregators fell for an AI-doctored photo of an explosion outside the Pentagon. Anyone can go to ChatGPT today and tell it to write an article in the style of *The New York Times* about Russia nuking the United States. The result is somewhat convincing, if not exactly Pulitzer-worthy. An example of the output: "The scale of devastation and loss of life is yet to be fully assessed, but early reports indicate a catastrophic impact on both infrastructure and human lives." OpenAI has attempted to train ChatGPT to refuse nefarious prompts, but the guardrails are still surprisingly permissive: It won't write fake articles referring to Xi Jinping or Joe Biden, but it can make up news about malfunctioning election machines and summarize the key points of vaccine skeptics (with a long preamble about "the overwhelming scientific consensus").

The focus on AI guardrails in the national security context belies a fundamental (and likely willful) misunderstanding of the technology. Training large-language models such as ChatGPT is incredibly expensive and resource-intensive, but once the models are created, they are relatively easy to download and run on a personal computer without any of the usual restrictions. An advanced generative AI model developed by Meta was already leaked online. It's laughable to think Russia or Iran would be hindered by guardrails on commercial chatbots. This is something the technology maximalists actually get

right: The cat is out of the bag, and licensing requirements would do little to prevent AI systems from getting in the wrong hands.

The more likely outcome is that licensing will increase existing market power, allowing the most powerful tech companies to lobby for safety standards only they can pass. In a recent interview, Microsoft President Brad Smith called for a licensing system that would ensure models are only developed in “large data centers where they can be protected from cybersecurity, physical security and national security threats.” The lack of subtlety here is almost comical: Microsoft, Amazon, and Google control virtually the entire U.S. public cloud market and hold highly coveted security clearances needed to bid on Department of Defense cloud contracts.

The Pentagon can also help tech

giants take out their primary foreign AI competitors in Alibaba and Baidu. It’s therefore very much in their interest to hype up the apocalyptic potential of AI, whether they believe it or not. A recent open letter signed by the likes of Altman, Bill Gates, and Microsoft CTO Kevin Scott said, in its entirety, “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.” The RAND Corporation, a military-funded think tank, has already developed plans for preventing “bad actors” (read: China) from developing advanced AI systems. Ideas include embedding microelectronic safeguards in advanced chips to prevent anyone from developing models without U.S. permission. And while it has a horrible record on censorship and surveillance, China already passed a set of AI safety

regulations with key privacy protections we may never enjoy in the U.S.

All of this ends up feeling tiresome. We’ve seen this playbook before: Censorship disguised as safety, economic warfare in the name of national security, profiteering beneath a veneer of social welfare. What’s particularly concerning about the AI hype cycle is that—as with the best lies—they contain more than a kernel of truth. Sam Altman and his ilk are true believers, even if they are also opportunists. They know fear is a powerful tool for coercion, but they also know there is something to fear. The hype cycle around AI makes it seem as though everything will become radically different, and while that may eventually prove true, for now it just distracts us from all that will stay the same. ■

*This article was originally published on June 12, 2023.*

ARTS & LETTERS

# The Horrible and Enlightening Life of Jean Améry

In an age of easy antisemitism, the Austrian Jewish Holocaust survivor's work remains bitter, resentful, and hauntingly pro-Zionist

BY DAVID MIKICS

**H**ans Mayer, a Jew from the Austrian countryside, was in love with the solitary woods, the streams, and the mountains of his native land. In 1934, when Hitler had been German chancellor for over a year and Catholic quasi-fascists controlled Austria, he wrote:

There are still tender, sensitive

souls in the country ... comfort may still be found in the landscape and in solitude ... Let them be supported by a non-political conservatism. Let them remain quiet, clear, and pure, the quiet country people, for the stridency of those who would improve the world today suits them ill.

Mayer’s trust in “the quiet country people” was misplaced. The Nazis declared him not a native but a foreigner,

and marked him for death. After surviving Auschwitz, he moved to Brussels. In 1955, protesting against his Germanic roots, he rearranged the letters of his name and became Jean Améry. (Amer means bitter in French.)

From the late '60s on, Améry was a frequent presence in Germany’s press and was often on the radio, a living reminder of what so many Germans wanted to repress. Now Indiana University Press has issued Améry’s *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, which contains Améry’s polemic for Israel, and against the German left’s endorsement of Palestinian terror. These vital works continue to haunt us, as Améry would have wanted.

Améry spent his childhood in the Vorarlberg, in rural Austria. His Jewish father was killed on the front in World War I when he was 3. His half-Jewish mother was both “excessively affectionate and excessively authoritarian,” Améry remembered, and “if she happened to be furiously jealous, like a deceived lover, she would say bluntly that I would end up on the gallows.” By 8 Améry had read the plays of Schiller, and felt superior to

his teachers. He adored going to church, especially on Easter Sunday, he recalled, “and yet I was vaguely aware that ‘in reality’ we were Jews.”

In the summer of 1932, Améry fell in love with a young woman from Graz, a redhead with a “snow-white complexion,” freckles, and “a tiny snub nose,” who wore the traditional Austrian dirndl. He discovered to his shock that she was not only Jewish but religious.

Améry had never thought much about Jewishness, least of all his own. Then came 1935. Améry said, “I read and interiorized the Nuremberg Laws forever. I became aware of my *being a Jew*.” Now, to say that he didn’t “feel Jewish” would merely be “private gameplaying,” a flimsy attempt to deny reality. He was a “catastrophe Jew,” forged by antisemitism.

During the March 1938 Anschluss, Améry bitterly remembered, Austria threw itself at Hitler “like a bitch in heat.” Jews were publicly tormented, forced to scrub the streets of Vienna. He was now married to Regine, the Jewish girl in the dirndl. A friend in the office of genealogy offered Améry an escape hatch: He could renounce his Jewish wife and swear that he was the product of his mother’s adultery with an Aryan. Instead Améry and Regine fled to Belgium, where he joined the resistance after Germany’s 1940 invasion. Arrested in July 1943, Améry told his wife that he would be back in half an hour. Instead he spent three months in the prison at Fort Breendonk, where he was tortured by the Gestapo.

On Jan. 15, 1944, Améry was deported from Belgium to Auschwitz. Of the 655 people on his transport, 417 were immediately gassed. Améry survived Auschwitz because German was his native language—in June he became a clerk at Buna-Monowitz, where Primo Levi also worked. Améry endured two other camps, Dora-Mittelbau and Bergen-Belsen. When he returned to Belgium, he learned that Regine was dead.

Améry made a living in postwar Brussels by writing books about jazz and American celebrities. Slowly, he started to turn toward his wartime suffering. In 1965 he wrote an essay for the German press about being tortured in Breendonk. *At the Mind’s Limits* was

published the next year, containing the essay on torture as well as his account of Auschwitz.

In “On Torture,” Améry rather drolly describes what he suffered under the Gestapo—he was hung from the ceiling, his arms dislocated from their sockets (“and now there was a cracking and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten to this hour”).

Torture, Améry says, was basic to the world of the Nazis, because in that world “man only exists by ruining the other person who stands before him.”

*At the Mind’s Limits* is titled in German *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, “Beyond Guilt and Atonement,” a play on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. The book contains an essay in praise of resentment, the feeling that Nietzsche found poisonous, since it was the key to the “slave morality” he abhorred.

Nietzsche savages resentment, while Améry clings to it. Resentment, Améry writes, “nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past... it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened.” Améry knew that resentment “blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future.” Yet he could not break away from it. In an essay on Améry, W.G. Sebald remarked that “for the victims of persecution” like Améry, “the thread of chronological time is broken, background and foreground merge, the victim’s logical means of support in his existence are suspended.” Resentment is the height of illogic, since it both insists on and rebels against the one terrible fact, one’s “ruined past.”

Améry was a sensitive and ambivalent reader of Nietzsche, who, he said in another essay, “still excites us today ... but also irritates us.” Nietzsche’s “powerful, suggestive eloquence,” he argued,

constantly runs the risk of becoming mere loquaciousness; his inclination to megalomania; the intensity of his style, which always borders on a sometimes rather dubious lyricism; his polemical force, which all too easily obscures the actual meaning of the statement; the specifically Nietzschean misanthropy, which the psychologist may trace to a lack of love (since

Nietzsche’s love for others went unrequited); the verbal excess that still today fascinates some thinkers, while others are struck with fear and trembling when they contemplate such intemperateness.

Améry’s characterizations of Nietzsche apply spectacularly well to himself. Like Nietzsche, Améry had polished Old World manners. One friend said he could picture him in a powdered wig, a man of the Enlightenment. But the charm was a cover for the loneliness that haunted Améry as it did Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, Améry’s eloquence is constantly on the verge of loquaciousness. He is intemperate by nature, and he knows it.

Yet Nietzsche’s case was utterly different from Améry’s. Améry was sentenced to death because he was a Jew. Nietzsche never imagined such a fate, neither for the Jews nor for anyone else. In the camps, death was a banal fact, Améry insisted. There was no place for the yearning, alienated soul championed by German Romanticism.

A self-described man of the left, Améry was appalled that young Germans of the 1970s were taking sides with the Arab forces intent on erasing Israel’s Jews from the face of the Earth. In 1969 Améry wrote about the left’s “virtuous antisemitism,” cloaked (then as now) in the false postcolonial colors of anti-Zionism. “Antisemitism resides in anti-Israelism and anti-Zionism as the thunderstorm does in the cloud, and it has become respectable again,” he commented.

Améry described his own “virtually nonexistent,” yet all-important, relation to Israel thus:

I have never been there. I do not speak its language, how little I know of its culture borders on the embarrassing, and its religion is not mine. And yet, the existence of no other state means more to me.

Every Jew, Améry stressed, “lives off this achievement,” the existence of Israel. “It gives him a proper place in the world, whether he admits this to



himself or not,” even if he thinks himself “wholly French or wholly American.” Three months before the Six-Day War, in June 1967, Améry said about himself, “Since there is talk of driving the Israelis into the sea, he is no longer a leftist intellectual but merely a Jew. For Auschwitz lies behind him, and the hoped-for Auschwitz II on the Mediterranean may well lie ahead ...”

Améry would visit Israel once, in 1976. In that year, he argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict “no longer bears the slightest resemblance to “normal” territorial disputes. It is pure Streicher. ... If Israel were destroyed, he asserted, “The world would again react as it did after 1933, when underpopulated states like Canada and Australia closed their doors to the Jews as if they were carriers of the plague.”

Améry’s reminder is timely these days. Anti-Zionism is once again acceptable cover for antisemitism. For strategic reasons, the Biden administration is again pursuing a deal with Iran that will leave that country on the brink of fielding nuclear weapons—making the threat to Israel’s existence greater than at any time since 1948.

In the early ’70s Améry plunged into writing *Lefeu, or the Demolition*, called an “essay-novel” because the author’s monologues are hard to tell apart from his main character’s. The cantankerous Lefeu is a hard-drinking, chain-smoking painter who refuses to move out of his Paris apartment building, which is going to be torn down. Out of sheer obstinacy, Lefeu, who lives on a shoestring, refuses to market his paintings. Eventually he remembers what he has for many years repressed: that his real name is Feuermann and that his parents were murdered by the Nazis. Lefeu decides to burn down the city of Paris, but instead settles for painting a canvas of Paris on fire. He then burns the painting and has a heart attack. “Survival [is] a contradiction [*Widersinn*],” he announces—but he survives.

Améry based Lefeu partly on Erich Schmid, a Jewish painter who, like Améry, escaped from Austria to Belgium in 1938, and whose family was killed in the camps. Like Schmid, Lefeu

lives while so many others, including his parents, have died. Améry expresses his own survivor’s guilt through Lefeu. He must have felt that a natural death was not his proper fate. Four days after completing the manuscript of his novel, Améry attempted suicide.

Améry’s *Lefeu* encountered a formidable opponent, Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Like Améry, Reich-Ranicki was a Jew and a Holocaust survivor. He was also Germany’s most influential literary critic, someone who could make or destroy reputations.

In his review, which appeared in the FAZ in June 1974, Reich-Ranicki called *Lefeu* an “unintentional caricature and parody” of Améry’s essays. Améry was merely “letting himself go,” ranting at will, Reich-Ranicki said, so that he could “give in to his direct impulses and secret desires” and “follow his associations without remorse.” Améry was devastated, even though Alfred Andersch and Elias Canetti had high praise for the book.

In 1976 Améry published *On Suicide*, his most disturbing book, and his most self-contradictory. He argues against efforts to prevent suicide, which for him is a legitimate choice. He frequently uses the German term *Freitod* (free death) rather than *Selbstmord* (self-murder), the usual term for suicide. Killing oneself, he insists, is not just escape, but liberation. The illogic of suicide, like that of resentment, lures Améry, and his writing becomes excited, even manic.

Améry turns repeatedly to the misogynistic, self-hating Jew Otto Weininger, who killed himself at 23. In Weininger’s “brain, agitated to death,” Améry writes, “only *woman* is reflected again and again, the creature he despises yet for whom he is not able to master his desire.” Weininger, as he approaches his death, “constantly sees only the *Jew*, the most disgraceful and lowest of all creatures, the Jew that he himself is.”

In an essay from his last year of life, “My Jewishness,” Améry spoke ominously of walls closing in on him, the same image that he earlier applied to Weininger:

The four walls are moving in;  
the room is becoming smaller. My

(involuntary) form of *being* a Jew without Jewishness (which, given my background and environment, I could acquire only at the price of turning my life into a lie) leads to the melancholia I endure every day. While experts would presumably classify it as “neurotic,” it strikes me as the only mood to which I am entitled.

Améry’s final book, *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor*, which appeared in 1978, hints at his own neurosis through his portrait of Flaubert’s character, who has been ruined forever by the disaster of Emma’s death. Another essay-novel, *Charles Bovary* is largely an attack on Flaubert for punishing his characters and himself so brutally. Mario Vargas Llosa argued that Flaubert created a “perpetual orgy” in the service of life and desire. By contrast, self-hatred motivates Améry’s Flaubert—“hatred of his class, of which, in his private life, he represents an ideal specimen.” Like Lefeu, Flaubert is a nihilist who cannot stand up to the world, so he substitutes his art for reality. “Defeat he experienced in his very depths,” Améry says about Flaubert. “The great doctor’s son was ‘just a fool, just an artist.’”

Améry wrote in *On Suicide* that killing oneself is a fact “much too horrible to be lamented.” The horror, he added, resides in a contradiction: The suicide seems to be saying *I die, therefore I am*. On Oct. 10, 1978, in a Salzburg hotel room, Améry took his own life. He left a farewell letter to his wife saying “I am on the way to freedom.” “I feel, like poor Charles, ‘terrible’ when I think of you, and am wretched,” Améry wrote. “But you have always understood me ...”

Ending his own existence was Améry’s most decisive blow against what the Nazis inflicted on him, since it released him from that trauma, but it was also a blow against himself. His tombstone in Vienna bears only his name, his dates of birth and death, and the number tattooed on his forearm—*Auschwitz Nr.172364*. ■

*This article was originally published on June 14, 2023.*

## THE REST

→ On Tuesday, former president **Donald Trump turned himself in at the federal courthouse in Miami on charges that he mishandled classified documents after leaving the White House.** As Trump sat with his arms crossed in the trial for the first case of a president facing federal criminal charges, his team pleaded not guilty to 37 charges against him. He was not required to give up his passport or restrict his travel, nor to pay bail to be released. Immediately after the proceedings, Trump headed to legendary Cuban restaurant Versailles, in Little Havana, where supporters sang Happy Birthday to him in advance of his 77th birthday. Trump replied, "Some birthday. Some birthday." Later Tuesday evening at his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf club, Trump defended his actions, telling the crowd, "Whatever documents a president decides to take with him, he has the right to do so. It's an absolute right. This is the law." He **accused President Biden of using the case against him to remove his "top political opponent" in the midst of an election.**

→ American novelist **Cormac McCarthy died at his home in New Mexico on Tuesday. He was 89.** McCarthy was born in Rhode Island in 1933 to an Irish Catholic family but grew up mostly in Tennessee, near abject poverty. His early books, including *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979), were lauded but didn't sell. McCarthy kept writing. His **masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*, came in 1985 and, according to literary critic Harold Bloom, was "the greatest single book since Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*."** But, still, McCarthy didn't have a bestseller until 1992's *All the Pretty Horses*, which made him a household name and gave him a measure of financial security. He rarely gave interviews, and spent his later years surrounded by physicists and biologists at the Santa Fe Institute.

→ In a real-life game of *Succession*, **multibillionaire investor George Soros has passed on his crown to his son Alex, 37,** *The Wall Street Journal* announced on Sunday. For years, insiders assumed that the Soros dynasty would be bequeathed to Soros' elder son Jonathan, who has more relevant experience in law and finance. But **Jonathan and his father had a falling-out over management styles when they worked together at the Soros hedge fund and Open Society Foundations.** Now the eldest Soros says it's Alex, and he has "earned it." The biggest question is: What is Alex going to do with the \$25 billion empire? He told the WSJ he's "more political" than his father and is of an explicitly left-wing persuasion—which doesn't sound much different than what Soros has already established as his philanthropic brand. He wants to help the Democratic Party appeal to Latino voters and get out the vote in the Black community, but also says Democrats need to be more "patriotic and inclusive."

→ Georgia's notorious **Fulton County Jail system is installing a monitoring system for inmates that can track not only prisoners' exact location but their heart rates as well.** The system—produced by Georgia-based firm Talitrix, which was hired by the prison—uses an intertwined array of monitoring bracelets and wall sensors to provide the information, which the sheriff's office hopes will eventually be able to "maintain spacing between designated inmates." The total surveillance lockdown emulates what's already being pioneered in China. In 2021, Chinese company Taigusys told *The Guardian* that its AI facial-recognition software was under contract with 300 prisons in China and had been useful in keeping the populations "more docile" by predicting negative emotions.

## THE BIG STORY

**On Monday, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley revealed that an FBI informant who had reported an alleged bribery scheme involving the president, his son Hunter Biden, and an Ukrainian energy company executive also said that the executive claimed to have 17 recordings of his conversations with the Bidens. According to Grassley, the FBI had redacted the relevant piece of the FD-1023 form where the agency's confidential source reported that the "foreign national"—now identified as Ukrainian energy company Burisma's owner, Mykola Zlochevsky—had kept the recordings as an "insurance policy." The reports about Joe and Hunter Biden's dealings with Burisma have been accumulating for years, but recent pressure by House Oversight Committee Chair James Comer has brought them back under the spotlight.**

**So far the House Oversight Committee's investigation has revealed that (primarily) during Joe Biden's vice presidency, the Bidens created more than 20 companies that "received over \$10 million from foreign nationals' [sic] and their related companies." The payments to these companies were deposited into a large number of accounts "to conceal the source of the funds and reduce the conspicuousness of the total amounts made into the Biden bank accounts," according to the committee.**

—Sean Cooper

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# Jim Dine's Bathrobe

The painter reflects on sunken ships, his family's Jewish history and those goddamn hearts

BY JEREMY SIGLER

*"It's a problem I have, I guess. I can't maintain my cool. I'm always being sloppy ... excessive."—Jim Dine*

I once had the opportunity to introduce the artist Jim Dine at a poetry reading at the Dia Art Foundation while I was working there briefly around 2013 as director of publications. I must have lost my cool, because I said something so unlike me that I still hear it echoing in my ears and it still causes me an ache of embarrassment and humiliation every time I rehear it. I stood at the podium before the silent, serious room and hit exactly the wrong note: "Jim Dine is IN THE HOUSE." Ugh. I came across like the host of a cheesy late night talk show, yo.

On that evening, Dine was appearing in the so-called "house" as a poet—poetry has always been a significant aspect of his work that is not generally recognized by the art or poetry establishments. Suffice to say, his reputation is more than secure as a visual artist. If you've ever picked up an academic art history textbook, you will see that back in the late '50s and early '60s Dine was one of the innovators of Happenings and a pioneer of the pop art movement. He has been working steadily ever since. Some would consider him a living legend.

I was in Chelsea recently for a meeting with Dine, who was installing his new show at Templon. I pulled the fancy frosted glass door and immediately discovered a legend in the flesh, who was in the midst of a chaotic situation, instructing about five big strong men, who may or may not have been wearing

yellow protective hard helmets (I can hear the Jewish mother in me cautioning them to "always wear your helmets"), working with a giant industrial crane to lower a massive bronze sculpture into place—one of the "Three Ships" that will be installed at Templon through July 28.

Jim was pointing to the exact location on the floor where this hulking metaphorical ship was to be set down, and the art handlers were all being polite and accommodating. My impression was that everyone loved Jim and was committed to helping him pin down the exact vantage point in the room that would give viewers the best chance to discover the subtle nuances of the work in the round.

When Jim saw me, he backed away from the manly work, and switched gears to his more intellectual demeanor, expressing how long he had lived with the works in his studio. The metaphorical "ships" looked a little like ruins left behind on parched land after a catastrophic drought—or what is now called an extreme weather event. Or like the corroded, barnacle-coated wreckage of a sunken tanker dredged up after a century in the dark salt water, seated on the sandy ocean floor—they looked weathered, or in the T.S. Eliot sense: wasted! They conveyed a feeling of obsolescence, like a city in Japan after a nuclear bomb drop. My inner Philip K. Dick was seeing them as sci-fi fossils from a distant past when mankind still hammered, sawed, raked, drilled, trimmed, clipped, and screwed.

These three gigantic shiplike creations had been "dined"—made to be mighty and tower in the room.

"They just released new images of the

Titanic." I ventured. "These look a little like those."

Jim looked surprised that his ships had conjured up such a feeling of doom, though when I mentioned that I saw a little of Samuel Beckett in their end-of-times absurdist theatricality he pleasantly agreed. "These go further than any of your previous Tool works," I said, "they have accumulated exponentially, and now look like the displacement of the entire inventory of a hardware store."

Jim chuckled. He could tell that I was leaning into them, and that they had triggered my imagination. Soon, more specific objects began to appear from the camouflage-assemblage—including actual power tools like a Black & Decker-type power drill hiding in plain sight, and a hatchet, hammer, saw, and full variety of gardening equipment, including clippers, a rake, a hoe, a pitchfork, a shovel, and a muddied broom. It was as if that hardware store had been dragged by rising flood waters and carried right into the gallery, before magically turning into bronze.

Jim seemed both pleased by their dramatic presence, but perhaps a little sad that I was perceiving them as being quite so dystopic. "They came together organically," he said quietly.

"Like the toolshed in every backyard across America," I offered, while delighting at Jim's dadaist sensibility. These were melancholy monuments, three dinosaurs, hallucinatory quixotic windmills—Giants!

Jim turned away and I followed his lead down a set of stairs to another side

## ROBERT GOTTLIEB (1931–2023)

"I was treated to a lunch of carrots, celery, and radishes by my editor, Robert Gottlieb, who was **ahead of his time on crudités**. After we'd nibbled at our food, Gottlieb made typing signs in the air—a suggestion that I return home immediately and begin the next book."

—Bruce Jay Friedman, in 'A Door Opens,' reminiscing about the lost world of New York editors

of Dine—his painterly side. In an intimate gallery space, there was a series of medium-size oil paintings that were extremely saturated, impasto-ed, gestural and brushy—another feast for the eyes. Each an exuberant self-portrait.

On another wall hung 12 smaller graphite drawings that were lifelike and tempered by a process of careful Cézanne-like obsessive observation—i.e., capturing one’s likeness in the mirror.

I quickly scanned the entire gallery of cartoony, somewhat exaggerated Jim Dine faces, turned to him and said the first thing that came to mind: “Why the big ears?”

“Cause I have big ears,” Jim said, looking right at me, as if presenting his face for viewing.

Jim then explained how COVID had kept him indoors, and how productive that year had been in Paris where he lives in the 14th arrondissement.

“Do you consider yourself an expat?” I asked, thinking of the painter Joan Mitchell who was famous for her need (back in the ’60s) to flee the New York art “scene” and retreat to a quiet studio outside of Paris, where she could paint in peace, hang out with the dogs, drink nonstop, kill the occasional pit viper (according to a story she once told), and enjoy drop-ins by gossipy poets like John Ashbery.

“I’ve been going back and forth to Paris and other parts of Europe for 50 years. And I spend a lot of time working in Germany. But I’m in America a lot, because I keep a farm on the Pacific Northwest.” He paused. “I am happier in Paris. Paris just looks better.” And he laughed—a contagious laugh.

I was reminded of a filmed interview I’d found online of Dine back in the ’60s when he was a brash 30-something, bad boy art star holding his own with Warhol and Lichtenstein, and the rest of the Leo Castelli Corp. In the film, he eviscerates the trendy New York art scene. “I found that people wanted to see me more than they wanted to see my paintings,” says Dine in the film. Then with a grin. “They all wanted to see how your wife dresses.”

I compared the youthful Jim Dine standing before me to the young man

in the black-and-white documentary film. What did it reveal? In one scene we watch him from the passenger seat of a Volkswagen bus (a Beat mobile) driving into the city, attempting unsuccessfully to tune in on a radio station. In another scene he is dressed in a handsome thick turtleneck sweater sitting in his living room. His eyes hide from the camera. He tries to come off like a family man, but it’s hard not to feel his brooding angst and to suspect, from his devilish grin, that he is easily distracted from domesticity.

In the film he says: “I live what I consider a very middle-class life, with three children, and a wife. And feel it is very necessary to maintain it at all times.” He then contrasts this to his studio life, where he explains he is free to “experience certain kinds of madness.”

And he pronounces that he intends to spend his life painting about himself and going on a “very long voyage.”

Here we were in 2023 and Dine is still on this voyage, still boiling over with boundless creativity—still making art with the muscle and bravado of a 20-year-old. The word voyage naturally reminded me of the “Three Ships” upstairs, which had just made their maiden “voyage” to NYC after being cast in Baker City, Oregon. Then I thought about Jim’s background, which like my own, involved a classic ancestral crossing of the Atlantic and arrival in America. I asked Jim if he didn’t mind talking about his family history.

“I was raised Jewish!” He laughed. “I was born in Cincinnati in 1935, which was one of four or five German Jewish towns in America then—others being Baltimore, San Francisco, St. Louis, and of course New York.”

“I have three grandparents that were born in Europe. And one who was actually born in Richmond, Virginia—my grandma. My grandfather came to America with his two brothers when he was 18. They left their parents there at their mill in a country town in Poland. The three of them were big country boys, who had been indentured by a cousin called Hunchback Cohen ... Humpy Cohen, they called him.” We both laughed. “He was bent



## In Praise of the Artichoke

From ‘You Gotta Have Hearts’

Today more than 40 varieties of artichokes are grown worldwide, mainly around the Mediterranean—especially in Italy, France, Egypt, and Spain—and of course in California, which produces most of the artichokes found in the U.S. There are two main categories of artichoke: the globe artichoke, like the Italian purple-tinted, thornless *carcioforomanesco*, which has been cultivated in Lazio since Etruscan times, or *carciofo cimarolo* sometimes called *carciofo mammolo*, which is used to make *carciofi alla giudia*; and the elongated artichoke, like the Sardinian *carciofo spinoso di Menfi*, a thorny, violet-topped artichoke cultivated in Melfi, which has PDO (protected designation of origin) status and is nicknamed *spinello* (“thorny bastard”) by the locals, and is usually braised or used in salads. In France the *Camus de Bretagne*—a gray-green globe artichoke from Brittany—is probably one of the most highly prized artichoke and is mainly used for steaming, while the small conical *Violet de Provence* is often eaten raw with a vinaigrette dressing and to make *artichauts a la barigoule*, artichokes simmered in olive oil on a bed of onions, shallots, and carrots.

—Paola Gavin

way over—but he was a shark! He got them all there and gave them jobs, for a fee. My grandpa, who was just a teenager, went to work at the Baldwin piano company. And one day he caught his finger—this finger (Jim was now pointing a finger in my face)—in the lathe!”

I studied Jim’s finger which had an odd stumpy, somewhat deformed look to it.

“And he went to the foreman and said, I gotta go home I’m bleedn’. And the foreman said OK, so he went home, and bandaged it as best as he could. And when he arrived at work the next day, the foreman came up to him and said, sorry you’re out.

“It was before the days of workmans’ comp or sick days.”

“And after that incident, Grandpa’s finger was ground down, so there was hardly a nail on it. But whatever was there right at the end of his finger looked like a kernel of corn.”

Jim was now getting very detailed, and as he spoke, I began to realize that the flood of memories was indeed the psychological force that propelled his art. It was this internal dialogue with memory and the triggered emotions that continued to put him at odds with the detached cool pop sensibility, where mining one’s psyche was often looked down on as being self-indulgent and overly poetic. The story he continues to tell himself makes him the perpetual outsider, the rogue, despite the fact that he has worked his way into virtually every major museum collection in the world.

Dine was still going on about the traumatic finger memory: “And he used the finger to speak Yiddish to us while tickling us at the same time. It was this huge finger, and he was a bit of a bully, and I loved the guy, but he drove me crazy. And he had a very thick

accent. And he and my grandma spoke Yiddish. I still use Yiddish now and then—it’s my patois. Mostly with my kids. Yiddish is our secret language.”

Jim Dine: My grandpa married my grandma (who was 16 at the time), and they headed south to a small town in Georgia where they opened a dry-goods store. They sold nails and strings, and pots and pans, dust pans and brooms, you name it—everything imaginable.

My mother’s grandfather was also a character—he was a tinkerer, and he had a horse and buggy, and he drove all over the South circumcising little boys and kosher-ing chickens.

Jeremy Sigler: He was a mohel?

JD: No! He had no certificate—I can tell you that!

JS: So I guess he would just improvise.

JD: When they died, they were buried in the Black cemetery in Albany, Georgia. They wouldn’t let Jews be buried in the white cemetery.

JS: It sounds like your grandparents must have experienced a lot of racism, which is also called “antisemitism.”

JD: Are you kidding? That’s why they left the South. I asked Grandma why we went to Cincinnati and she said, the Klu-Klux-ers. Just like that.

When they moved to Cincinnati, Grandpa founded a little synagogue with like six other Polish Jews in the neighborhood, and he really loved it. But when my mother grew to be a teenager she begged him to stop going to the Temple. She was snobbish and really wanted to be a gentile. They eventually joined a Reform synagogue, but it was a personal tragedy for my grandpa—he lost the language and rituals, and found himself in this Episcopal synagogue where services were conducted entirely in English.

JS: Inauthentic.

JD: Yeah. The place looked and sounded like a church! So I was born into the Reform movement. And just about everybody I knew went to this same temple. It was a strong part of my family, but my mother ignored it. The Seder was always held at somebody else’s house, not ours. We did go to a religious school, but it wasn’t Hebrew

school. We went to something called Sunday school!

Jim was now deeply immersed in the past, which is exactly where I wanted him (and where my editors at Tablet wanted him). “I hated Sunday school,” he said with a bit of rage in his eyes. “I hated all school. The idea that I had to go to school for even one more day was ridiculous.”

“Why did you resent school so much?” I asked.

“I was dyslexic.”

“Oh.”

“But I was artistic. By age 2 I was constantly drawing. It scared the shit out of everybody.”

“Did they approve of you growing up to become an artist?”

“My mother was very proud of my drawing ability.”

“Your talent.” I smiled (the cliché of the Jewish mother had again come to mind).

“And she was also proud of my verbal skills. And that I loved to sing and dance and perform. Had I not been a painter I would have aspired to be an actor.”

“A triple threat.”

“So anyway that’s my Judaism.” Jim said, chuckling a bit. “I’m pretty embarrassed by it all.”

“Can we talk about your history becoming an artist and arriving to New York?”

“When I was 12, my mother died and we were very close. And my father remarried almost immediately—a horrible woman—a monster. And she hated me and my little brother (who is five years younger than me). And finally my father said, I think it would be better if you left. I was 13, and I jumped with glee, knowing I’d finally get out of their fairy tale hellhole.

“I went to live with my grandma and grandpa and entered high school—that is, when I went,” he said snickering as if he were still a bit of a wayward adolescent. “But I was a horrible student, and I actually cheated my way through school. The girls I went to school with were so kind to me. They would hold their test papers up allowing me to peek over their shoulders and see the answers. They were such sweethearts.

## ARTS & LETTERS

Books, culture, and more at  
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arts-letters](https://tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters)

But I had behavior problems, and teenage hormones.

“My grandpa then became very ill with heart disease, and I took over his car, and the first thing I did was register for adult art classes at the Art Academy, which was hooked up to the Cincinnati Art Museum. I was free at last! It was wonderful! I registered for all these classes like French (I wanted to speak French because of Matisse), and I registered for History of the Ancient World, and spent a good amount of time literally drawing from antiquity. My mother had always taken me to the museum so that I could draw their plaster replicas of Greek sculptures like the Venus de Milo.”

“So now I see where your subjects come from. They truly are autobiographical.”

“Sure. I’ve done so many Venus de Milo’s.”

“There’s a giant one on 53rd Street right? It’s about a block from MoMA. I wonder how many people walk past that thing every day? It has to be the best real estate for a public sculpture in all of New York City!”

“Yes. It was a very big public commission. But anyway, one day a guy I knew came up to me and said, what are you still doing in Cincinnati? You’ve gotta come up with us. We’re having the best time at State University of Athens, Ohio (not Ohio State). The school of fine art there is sensational, he said. And so we drove up in my car (I had just inherited it because my grandpa had passed away). And I walked into the art school and introduced myself to the professors and showed them my portfolio, which was just a bunch of drawings I had tucked under my arm, and they let me in immediately! And I had all of these wonderful professors who taught me so many techniques. But I had the sense that they really truly believed in me.”

## ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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“Why did I have an attraction but simultaneously a repulsion to Dine’s imagery? Had I not looked hard enough?”

“—which must have given you a lot of confidence.”

“I wasn’t just any other student, you know? I was really turned on. And I would stay there working in the art building like 24/7 painting, print making, drawing, sculpting... you name it. But I was also going over to the library where I found these bound copies of *ARTnews* going back year by year. So I started to steal them. I used them like a bible. I read and reread every review by Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery. I read about Elaine de Kooning and Grace Hartigan. But my main interest was always in Kline and de Kooning. I thought that was the only place to go after Picaso and Matisse.”

I turned to face the collection of graphite drawings, hoping to draw Jim back into the present, to further understand his working methods. “And when you draw you really erase a lot, don’t you. I can see that the paper gets really rough and worn down and even torn in places.”

“Yes over time, after so much drawing and erasing, the paper gets very fragile. And so I often have to patch it from the back. I often think I’ve ruined one—but then I come back and I’m compelled to go further with it. In fact, I’d like to continue on a few of these.” He smiled.

“And I use my fingers a lot.” Jim

showed me his left hand again, and a rather deformed stubby middle finger. “This one, it was injured about six years ago when the disc on the grinder I was using flew off. It seared the bone and fucked up my fingernail. And now the finger is always a little numb. But I can use it like a mahl stick, the same way Matisse did to steady his hand.”

“I’m reminded of the story you told before about your uncle’s horrific finger injury.”

“Yup. When I showed my finger to all my kids they immediately said, Morris Cohen.”

Jim and I finally sat down and sunk into this sofa in a private room, I turned to him, and in a moment of perhaps too much honesty, I confessed how much I “struggled” with his art. I chose that word carefully. I also told him that I had mentioned to a colleague that I was working on a piece for Tablet on Jim Dine, who responded with, “Oh I haven’t really thought about his work in a long time.”

Jim looked at me with growing curiosity.

“I call it the Jim Dine paradox—you are a forgotten artist that no one can forget. And even weirder, nobody can remember why they forgot you.

It’s always a little hard to tell if you were ahead of or behind the pack. Or maybe just off in the corner doing your own thing. Like those very banal tie paintings from the late ’50s—they are actually pre-pop.”

“If anything more like very early Red Grooms, or Larry Rivers, or even Joe Brainard.”

Why did I have an attraction but simultaneously a repulsion to Dine’s imagery? Had I not looked hard enough? What was I not seeing or “reading” in the pages of his very honest coming-of-age story—in his Palettes (once compared to the elegant swerving Ohio River); in his bathroom sinks and medicine cabinets fixed to canvases in the same manner as Rauschenberg and Johns (works that certainly foreshadow Damien Hirst’s very clever Pharmacies); in his Tools (often appearing like eroticized nude women, allowing you to stare at the gaps between their legs;

## A Safe Space

### On 'The Emperor's Daughter's New Skin'

A favorite rhetorical format in the Talmud is one in which a sage verbally faces off with a mighty opponent. The format implies that an antagonism relocated away from an arena of physical rivalry and into the realm of knowledge is one in which the sages are guaranteed the triumphant last word. But as the scholar Mira Balberg argues, such a verbal contest did not only function to “solidify rabbinic standing,” it also allowed the rabbis a safe space to grapple with theological, political and aesthetic questions and doubts without crossing boundaries of faith and tradition.

—Alyssa Quint

in his vulgar men's Bathrobes (portraits of an invisible man in the liminal space between dress and undress); in his replicas of the ancient beheaded Venus de Milo (a reference, I know, understood to be leading straight back to his first fan, his mom); in his creepy Pinocchios (a doll he dragged along with him for much of his adult life); and perhaps mostly in his big pendant Hearts! Those goddamn hearts!

The painter Alex Katz (who is about Jim's age), I told my wife, is rediscovered by every generation who falls in love with him; when the next generation discovers Dine, they become slightly offended by him all over again. Is it his sloppy excessiveness? His psychoanalytic probing? His grandiosity? His mojo? His Hemingway-esque hubris? His Energizer bunny productivity? His wide-eyed ambition that inevitably leads to self-destruction and catharsis?

I tried harder to explain my mixed feelings. “I've never actually dismissed your work, but I haven't ever quite come to terms with it.”

Jim's face looked bemused. He is 88, and hard at hearing, has a very bald head, and a little bit of saggy flesh around his neck, but could pass for 50. Let's put it

this way, he looks like he can still get it up, with or without Viagra.

“Can we talk about the bathrobes? I've never worn one. Nor have I sat back in a barber chair and had my face shaven. Nor have I ever used one of those black pocket combs. No offense, but when I see a bathrobe right now in the post-#MeToo moment we're all in, I get this cringy feeling.”

“Why is that?”

“First I think of Charlie Rose. He was #MeToo'd if you recall after a woman on his staff said that he invited her to his estate in Bellport, and after getting water on his pants, reappeared in a white bathrobe, which he left open in front of her and other employees. According to the woman, he had nothing on underneath.

“I see the men's bathrobe as a signifier or something. It even appears in the Harvey Weinstein case: According to a similar story by Lauren Hutton, she was invited to Weinstein's office in Tribeca to read a script, and Harvey appeared in a dirty white bathrobe.” In *People*, Hutton said, “The bathrobe was enough for me.”

But is Dine's bathrobe enough for me? Yes, and no. Maybe I want the robes to be even creepier, the way Hugh Hefner crept us all out with his velvet and satin monogrammed smoking jacket, which became a major component of the *Playboy* lifestyle. In the '70s, Harry Nilsson appeared on the album cover of his grammy winning *Nilsson Schmilsson* in a yucky brown terry cloth bathrobe.

Dine rather innocently remarked “I found it while leafing through the pages of *The New York Times* magazine section one day—it was this enigmatic, figureless bathrobe. The man's body had been airbrushed out.”

For some reason Dine felt that his own body was missing from the robe. He was either consciously or subconsciously looking into his dreams at an archetype of the father or discovered some dimension of his repressed inner masculinity. Or just going with the flow, expressing one of many popular department store products of the day. I told Jim that I probably would have entirely rejected his work years ago due mainly to his cringe-worthy bathrobes and ridiculously sentimental hearts had I not encountered one very messy brushy heart with

a small cyclops eye directly in its center, slightly cropped, and printed on the New Directions paperback cover of the “one-eyed poet” Robert Creeley's collection titled *So There: Poems 1976-1983*.”

Jim looked a little confused—my guess is that he was now thinking he'd been ambushed: “Why did this guy come all this way up to Chelsea to trash my work and cancel me.”

“What is weird,” I said, hoping not to dig my grave any deeper, “is that while I never liked your work, I refused to disregard it. I can still feel it working in the wood shop of my subconscious, grinding, sanding, always cutting against the grain of my brain. I love its potential to be built into meaning, in spite of my distaste for it.”

This didn't seem to make matters worse. While Dine still looked a bit surprised by my honesty, he was certainly not angry.

“Against the grain of my brain.” That's a good line,” he said.

“Thanks.” I said, and I got back on my train of thought: “Here's my rationale,” I said, “If Creeley liked you enough to put you on the cover of his book, then I like you too.”

And with this comment Dine's face, which was frozen in hard concentration (as he was now trying to figure me out, kind of as a fellow poet, and fellow weirdo), dramatically seemed to pop open like one of those combination locks that you keep spinning clockwise and counterclockwise stopping at various numbers you can hardly remember.

Jim's eyes came to life and a big smile formed revealing a beautiful set of amazing teeth for any man his age, and a lovely smile. Those hearts go back centuries, and they spike in popularity every year on Valentine's Day and even made it onto Glazer's very famous “I [heart symbol] New York.” Go back to

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the fourth grade and try to remember folding that red piece of construction paper in half, cutting that wonderful curve with those little lefty scissors (did I tell you Jim and I are both lefties) down the diagonal line arriving at a single point. Unfold the paper, and there it was!—that perfectly symmetrical heart. Then out would come the Elmer's glue and the crayons, and you'd write "I love you Mommy."

"You know Jim," I said, trying to keep myself afloat, "I do want to know what drove you to embrace those menacing hearts and to keep drawing painting, printing, and sculpting them repeatedly, knowing how frustrating they were and still are, with their undeniable sentimentality. You once said you painted a shoe and wrote the word shoe under it just to make a truly 'dumb painting.' Well, in my opinion, the heart is like 10 times dumber than a shoe. And like a hundred times dumber than a men's bathrobe!"

I think Jim was beginning to wonder if he was wasting his time with a guy pretending to be a journalist, and he finally cut me off, and really busted out a statement: "I left myself open to be dismissed by so-called 'serious people.'" he said. "But I was so happy with the show after I saw those paintings up on the wall. I knew I was finally at the peak of my powers, and that I couldn't do better. And then I thought, maybe the next time I should make like 6 HUGE hearts! STICK IT UP YOUR ASS! Ya know?"

Just then an old man who looked like he could have been a painter from Jim's generation walked in, who also must have been getting a sneak peek at the show prior to its official opening. He came right up to us, as if to shake Jim's hand. But rather than interrupt us with words, he balled his hand up into a fist and lightly tapped it to his chest a few

times, as if to say "Your work always has soul. Thank you for staying true to yourself!" (That's the way I read his gesture anyway.)

I too admire Jim's audacity and bravery and autonomy. He had claimed the heart symbol the same way Warhol claimed the Campbell soup can and Brillo box, and same way Yves Klein claimed ultramarine blue. It now made sense: It was Jim Dine's valentine to the world—an act of unadulterated shameless kitsch. *Kinehora!*

Jim, of course, knew the word, and was enjoying my enthusiasm, but we were both beginning to fade. "Do you have any other questions," he asked. "I'm afraid I'm gonna have to catch a flight back to Paris in a few hours."

"Yes, one more," I said. "Do people realize how central you were to the Happenings and *nouveau réalisme* (which was considered mainly a movement based in France)? Do they realize that you were there at the beginning, with Grooms, Kaprow, Oldenburg, Whitman. And do they realize that you were also there at the very start of the Judson Church dance scene? Have they gone back in the archives and seen all those black-and-white photographs of you more or less inventing the genre of neo-dada performance art?"

"No. Not really."

"I think it's because the works were so ephemeral and the documentation has hardly been published or exhibited. You once said, 'I used exposure of myself as a medium. I knew people wouldn't like it, that they'd say they were bored, when they meant they were nervous ... they said things like, 'we don't want to see his problems.' And you also admitted to the 'difficulty in exposing yourself' and the drive to make it 'difficult for the audience' as well by 'asking them to relate to you, rather than you relating to them.'"

In the Happenings that began around 1958 artists basically attacked the gallery "environment" (as Kaprow called it) with balls of twine, coarse burlap, crumpled newspaper, chicken wire, buckets of paint, plastic wrap, cardboard, cheap clip lights, aluminum foil, clown white face paint, wooden sticks, ladders, clothespins, underwear, bandages, bed

sheets, folding chairs and utter trash. But Dine was the one who brought in the proverbial "couch"—or the experience of being on the couch in your psychoanalyst's Upper West Side apartment office. I then asked Jim what he remembered most from the Happening:

"It was something called the New York Theater Rally," he said, "In which Rauschenberg, Carolee Schneemann, Bob Morris participated. Along with the Judson dancers, like Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti ... and EVERYONE hated what I did. Only Carolee Schneemann got it. She said that I was the only one who had ever dealt with their unconscious."

"What did you do?"

"It was me just sitting in a chair smoking a cigarette. And people around me doing specific jobs over and over. And there was this prerecorded audio track of me reading my dreams out loud. And it continued for about a half hour."

"Like a poetry reading."

"And it pissed so many people off. Because people wanted action. But for me this was the action. Critics and historians like Annette Michelson or Rosalind Krauss have said 'I didn't want to hear his libido.' Or something like that—like fuck off."

But I also remember another Happening called "The Smiling Workman." I came out on stage, made some strange noises. My face was painted red, my head was painted red, I had a big black mouth. And there was a big canvas. And I wrote on it in a frantic way: 'I love what I'm doing.' And then, I took the paint that I was painting with and drank it."

I gasped.

"And then I poured it over my head."

"Then what?" I asked, feeling a bit like a little boy being told a bedtime story by a grandpa with a deformed stubby finger.

"Then I dove through the canvas!"

Just as Jim's story ended my cell-phone lit up. There was an incoming text message from my daughter—a heart next to a yellow round face with gushing tears. It was like a blast of pure uncut dopamine. I quickly affixed a smaller heart to her message, and immediately pressed send. ■

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# The Gangster Who Defended the Unions— With a Lead Pipe

'My heart lay with the workers,' said 'Dopey Benny' Fein, expert organizer and 'shtarker' of the Lower East Side

BY ALLAN LEVINE

*"Benjamin Fein has come into the public view as the organizer of the gangster business who placed it on an economical basis and while making it profitable for himself provided reasonably steady work for his employees ... Mr. Fein, otherwise known as Dopey Benny, whose confession has been so helpful to the police, is no innovator in his art, but he will be remembered as an expert organizer."*

—*New York Times*, May 16, 1915

**I**f ever there was the archetypal Jewish *shtarker*, or gangster-thug, in the annals of the Lower East Side, it was Benjamin Fein, more notoriously known as "Dopey Benny." He was no drug or dope fiend, as his street monicker suggested. An adenoidal and nasal problem that made his eyelids heavy was the reason his fellow gang members anointed him with his nickname.

The Dope, as he was also called in the press, was clever and cunning. While only in his mid-20s, he took advantage of the so-called "business" opportunity that presented itself, providing "muscle" and "strong-arming" to struggling garment unions then at the mercy of manufacturers, who hired their own thugs to terrorize union leaders and striking workers. Monk Eastman and Big Jack Zelig, Benny's predecessors as head of the East Side gang, initiated such *shtarker* (or *starker* in newspaper

stories) work for the garment industry, but it was Dopey Benny who was a true pioneer of labor racketeering in Manhattan. He was indeed the "expert organizer," as *The New York Times* designated him, who made assaulting and maiming someone and wrecking shops and factories profitable commercial ventures governed by set fees and contracts drawn up by lawyers.

Often nasty and brutal, Benny had no qualms about beating someone, clipping ears, or breaking kneecaps and arms—or ordering his men to do so—if that was what the job or situation demanded. On one occasion, he was hired by a union leader to punish a "forelady" for being too cozy with a factory owner. Benny was instructed to throw this woman down the cellar stairs. At first, he was reluctant to hurt the woman. Yet, when the union official told him that he would no longer hire him for future jobs if he did not do what was required, Benny acquiesced. "We followed the woman until she was passing a saloon with an open cellar door," he later recalled. "We threw her down the open cellar and got away. She screamed and a lot of people came who took her to a drug store. I got \$50 for that job."

There was nothing unusual or disturbing in Benny's childhood that set him on his nefarious career path. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was born on July 20, 1887, into a typical East Side Jewish immigrant family (the family's surname was originally Feinschneider).

His father, Jacob, was a tailor and he had four sisters. At a young age, however, like other Jewish children of his generation who grew up in the East Side, Benny got into trouble. He started stealing packages from delivery carts and became a skilled pickpocket, so much so that while he was still a teenager, he trained other boys to be thieves.

In early October 1905, an East Side public school principal launched a complaint with the police that Dopey Benny, as he was already known, was seen walking in the vicinity of the school recruiting boys to join what the *Times* called his "criminal academy." The principal said that many of his students were seduced by Benny's promises of money and good times. Soon after, the police arrested Benny on charges that he had robbed one man and assaulted another.

Before he was 20 years old, Benny had been sentenced to two terms at the Workhouse prison (for minor offenses) on Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island); sent to the Elmira Reformatory on a grand larceny conviction; and arrested several times for assault and disorderly conduct. At some point, he joined Monk Eastman's gang and met Big Jack Zelig, among other East Side gangsters who mentored him. In late October 1908, Benny's legal troubles got worse: He was convicted of burglary and was incarcerated for three-and-a-half years in Sing Sing prison. There were to be many more arrests for him in the future and he was to spend more time locked up in prison. But such legal consequences did not deter his criminal enterprises.

Benny was released from Sing Sing in mid-1912. A few months later, Zelig was murdered while he was on a trolley car. There was a brief power struggle between Benny and Joe "the Greaser" Rosenzweig for leadership of the Zelig gang, which Benny won without much difficulty.

Benny's rise to power coincided with unrest in the New York garment industry. Despite the establishment of unions like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the United Hebrew Trades (UHT)—which by 1910 had 106 unions in its organization that represented approximately 150,000

men and women—the fight for higher wages, better working conditions, and collective bargaining rarely stopped. There were long, bitter, and often violent strikes. Though there were negotiated agreements—like the “Protocol of Peace” in 1910 that ended the walkout of about 65,000 cloakmakers—management did not always honor such deals, routinely used strikebreakers, and hired thugs to harass and beat workers on the picket lines. In such confrontations, the police tended to side with the factory owners.

It only made sense—or so it seemed—for the unions to fight fire with fire and hire their own thugs to protect their members and mete out punishment to those who challenged or opposed them. While Monk Eastman and Jack Zelig offered their *shutarker* services to both management and unions, Benny decided that he and his men were to become the guardians of the unions and the beleaguered Jewish working men and women toiling in factories and sweatshops. He later claimed that “my heart lay with the workers,” and that he had even twice turned down payments of \$15,000 (about \$450,000 today) from garment industry owners to end his work for the unions, yet he refused both times.

Whether he was being genuine is hard to say. He was well paid by the unions and would not have wanted to jeopardize that profitable relationship. Assistant District Attorney Lucien Breckenridge, who interviewed Benny at length in 1914-15, believed he was being sincere in his championing of the workers. “The man really had a conviction,” said Breckenridge, “that he was helping along in his own way a cause in which he believed.”

Whatever Benny’s true motivations, once the unions enlisted his gang’s services, their battle with the owners became even more violent. It was a dicey arrangement, which served to taint union leaders, directly link them to criminal actions that they could not always control, and embroil them in serious problems with New York justice officials.

The gangsters were remunerated in two ways, though all the money was filtered through Benny, who paid his men

about \$7.50 a day at a time when a garment worker barely made \$2 (perhaps as much as \$2.50) a day. Benny, himself, became wealthy. He estimated that he was making \$10,000 a year (about \$300,000 today), a sizable fortune in 1914. For several years, Benny received a weekly salary as high as \$40 from UHT (and \$25 if he was in jail). This was in addition to his extra fees for specific services, which were all itemized in his contract. Raiding and wrecking a small manufacturing shop cost \$150 and for a larger one, \$600. For shooting someone in the arm or leg or cutting part of an ear off, the fee was anywhere from \$60 to \$100, depending on the severity of the damage inflicted. It cost \$200 to throw a foreman down an elevator shaft or break his arm or thumb, and the same price for a “complete knock-out” of any working man. For factories that had primarily female employees, Benny enlisted a team of women gangsters armed with sharp hatpins and umbrellas weighted down with lead slugs so that the bosses and seamstresses would get the union’s “message.”

The gangsters’ favorite weapon was a sawed-off lead pipe covered in a newspaper. Benny convened his own tribunal in which he acted as judge to determine the guilt and punishment of a worker who had disobeyed union officials by not joining a picket line or, worse, was a strikebreaker at a different factory from the one where they were employed. Once Benny had delivered his judgment, no appeals were allowed. Those found guilty had their thumbs or arms broken or their ears slashed.

To bring a semblance of order to the business, Benny sought out alliances with other gangs. He devised a system where each gang only accepted contracts in their own designated district or neighborhood. So, if, for instance, Benny, was offered a contract to go after someone on the Lower West Side (Tribeca), he turned over the job to the Hudson Duster gang, and the Hudson Dusters reciprocated by passing on any gang work offered to them in the East Side to Benny, where he was the boss. The system worked reasonably well except several gangs, most notably, the one in Five Points controlled by Jack Sirocco and

Chick Tricker, longtime and bitter rivals of the Jewish East Side gang, refused to cooperate or take orders from Benny.

The Sirocco and Tricker gang often acted as thugs for employers, which put them on the opposite side from Benny and his men. In 1913 and 1914, the violent battles between the two gangs intensified and on more than one occasion, as the gangs shot wildly at each other seeking revenge for one action or another, innocent bystanders were injured and killed. The worst altercation occurred early in January 1914 when Benny and his men ambushed a group of Sirocco-Tricker men near the Arlington Dance Hall at St. Marks Place. The attack was retaliation for a recent shooting at Benny and a few of his men by the Five Points gangsters in front of Madison Square Garden. No one died at that earlier shootout. But this time, Frederick Strauss, a 65-year-old clerk at the city court with a wife and children, happened to be walking by the dance hall when the gunfire started and he was killed.

Strauss’ death shocked the city and the district attorney and the police were determined to arrest those responsible. Within a few days, Benny and several of his men were taken into custody. Yet, they were soon released because officials did not have sufficient evidence to indict them. Benny claimed that his arrest “was part of a systematic persecution of him.”

Benny’s legal troubles did not end there. Five months earlier, in August 1913, he had had an altercation with an NYPD sergeant named Patrick Sheridan, who had accused Benny of loitering in front of a Turkish bath. Sheridan later said he was responding to a complaint made by the bath’s owner, but the owner denied that he had asked the police for assistance. In any event, a fight broke out between Sheridan and Benny. Depending which version of this story you believe either Benny grabbed Sheridan’s nightstick and beat him with it, or in the more likely scenario—one related by Abe Shoenfeld, the chief investigator for the New York Kehilla’s Bureau of Social Morals—Sheridan struck Benny in the face for no reason. Benny hit Sheridan back. The officer then took out his

nightstick and whacked Benny on the head with it. Other police officers soon arrived and when Benny resisted arrest, the officers used blackjacks to beat him badly into submission.

Despite Benny's obvious injuries at the hands of the police, he was charged with felonious assault (or assault with a deadly weapon). At his trial held at the end of January 1914, he was found guilty and sentenced to a five-year prison term. This time, justice, at least from Benny's point of view, prevailed. His lawyers appealed the sentence and in late May 1914, the Appellate Court reversed the conviction and ordered a new trial. The judge ruled that Benny had struck Sheridan, but that the policeman was not hurt severely enough to warrant the gangster being charged with felonious assault. He was released from prison on bail and subsequently exonerated.

While awaiting a new trial in the Sheridan case, he found himself in legal jeopardy yet again. This time, he was arrested for extorting and threatening butcher Benjamin Solomonowitz, an organizer for the Butcher's Union. Benny assumed that the UHT would pay his \$7,500 bail (later raised to \$10,000), but no financial assistance was forthcoming. Angry and feeling betrayed, he made a deal with the Manhattan district attorney, Charles Perkins, and confessed to his many sins, including exposing his *shtarker* work for the Jewish unions. In exchange for dropping the extortion charges, Benny testified before a grand jury in February 1915 and then in mid-May he spoke to the press. The police and DA's office also made much of his testimony available to the public. Featured in the newspapers, it was a sensational tale of corruption and the inner workings of the gangster business going back to the days of Monk Eastman. As evidence of transactions with the unions, Benny provided the DA with his diary containing lists of names and amounts paid to him by labor leaders who hired him and his men for various jobs.

There was a serious fallout from Benny's grand jury testimony. Twenty-three union leaders, mostly from the UHT and Cloak and Shirtmakers' Union, were arrested as were 11 gangsters for their

**“Once Benny had delivered his judgment, no appeals were allowed. Those found guilty had their thumbs or arms broken or their ears slashed.”**

strong-arm work. The union officials were accused of hiring thugs to terrorize employers and they and the gangsters were charged with assault, extortion, and rioting. Seven union officials were also charged with conspiring in the murder of Herman Liebowitz, a cloakmaker and union member, who during a major strike in 1910, had worked in a nonunion shop outside of the city in order to provide for his family.

Abraham Shiplacoff, the secretary of the UHT—among other Jewish labor leaders and pro-union newspaper editors such as Abraham Cahan of the *Forward*—denounced the DA for targeting Jewish union officials. While Shiplacoff declared that Benny was “a terrorist, a low gunman and a scoundrel,” most Jewish union officials and newspaper editors avoided commenting on the connection between the unions and the gangsters. Because, as historian Jenna Weismann Joselit points out, “to many Jews, they were obviously not the revelations they were touted to be.” Despite the hyperbole around the indictments, Perkins and his staff, in the end, were unsuccessful in securing a conviction in the Liebowitz murder trial and other indictments against the union leaders and the gangsters were dismissed by Perkins' successor, Edward Swann.

In January 1916, Benny spent two

months in jail for assaulting a strike-breaker. By the end of the year, having been accused again of involvement in killing of Frederick Strauss in January 1914 in testimony given to the DA by his old gangster colleague, Joe “the Greaser” Rosenzweig, then serving a 10-year sentence in Sing Sing, Benny decided to go straight—at least temporarily. He purchased his own garment manufacturing business and in 1917 married Gertrude Lorber. By 1929, they had a daughter and two sons.

Benny (presumably) stayed out of trouble until the summer of 1931 when he and two associates appeared in court accused of felonious assault for throwing acid on a businessman named Mortimer Kahn. There were no legal consequences for this alleged action, however. A decade later, Benny, then 55 years old, was arrested again along with veteran gangster Abe Cohen, 57, and several other men on a stolen goods charge and involvement with the robbery of a large garment shipment. In late October 1941, the two men were found guilty of “criminally concealing and withholding stolen and wrongfully acquired property” and received lengthy jail sentences. Yet, once more, Benny was lucky. He and Cohen only spent about two years in prison. In 1944, an appeal judgment granted them a new trial and they were both acquitted.

Thereafter Dopey Benny's gangster days finally ended for good. He died from cancer on July 23, 1962, a few days after his 75th birthday. No doubt, he had spent his last years regaling his grandchildren with wild stories about his days as a *shtarker* and East Side gangster boss, tales of crime and mayhem that the youngsters probably had a hard time believing. ■

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# A Place to Nurture Plants—and People

At an organic farm in northern Israel, troubled teenagers find a refuge where they can change the course of their lives

BY ANI WILCENSKI

A few months ago, on a family trip to Israel, we drove deep into the green hills of the Galilee Valley to visit a sustainable farm called Kaima Hukuk. The reason for our trip was educational; my younger brother is studying sustainable agriculture at Cornell, where he spends his school days climbing trees and growing corn (I imagine) and was excited to learn about Israel's world famous agricultural innovations. As a New Yorker who can barely keep a potted plant alive, I tagged along with mild annoyance, preparing to tune out as we walked through fields of carrots and talked about watering cans, or whatever farming people do.

But 10 minutes into the visit, I was utterly engrossed. For one, the farm, which is located on a picturesque kibbutz, was beautiful, with lush green fields set against puffy white clouds and a soundtrack of chirping birds. Standing in the field and looking up into the distance, you can see the stone buildings of Tzfat, Israel's mystical city, stacked against the sky.

The symbolism is a little too perfect. As the 45-year-old farm manager, Asaf Zaiden, explained as he walked us through the fields, Kaima Hukuk, named after the kibbutz, is mostly operated by people from Tzfat and the surrounding areas—specifically teenagers, some as young as 12, who have dropped out of school and came to Kaima Hukuk with nowhere else to go.

It is estimated that 11% of Israeli children have dropped out of school, a

number that rose dramatically during the pandemic. The government is working to combat the trend, but the official numbers don't tell the full story. According to the Education Ministry, the total number of formal dropouts during the 2020-21 school year averaged only half a percent of the student population. But there is a much larger group of unofficial, or "hidden," dropouts—children who struggle with significant social, personal, and emotional challenges that make them "present but absent" in the Israeli school system.

Kaima Hukuk's mission, using a model of "employment as education," is to help these dropouts turn their lives around. Zaiden, who used to work as a teacher for disabled adults, helped found the project in 2015. The organizers modeled the farm after Kaima Beit Zayit, an organic farm on the outskirts of Jerusalem that had developed a hybrid pedagogic-vocational style of mentoring struggling youth. "When I came to the area, I saw there were a lot of children who needed an answer," said Zaiden.

The children who come to the farm feel that the system has failed them. Many are victims of abuse; some are on the streets struggling with drugs and alcohol and committing petty crimes. Others are suffering from anxiety, depression, and other untreated mental health issues. Nearly everyone is from a poor, religious or very religious family with lots of children, where a child's challenges can easily fade into the background of a crowded home. Some are questioning whether they even believe in God anymore, a struggle

complicated by their devout families and the growing conservatism of Tzfat and the surrounding areas.

The farm workers are now evenly split between girls and boys, but in the past the farm was nearly 75% girls. Sometimes sisters would come from the same family. "It is a cruel world outside," explained Zaiden. "They know the farm will be a safe place for them. They will be respected as human beings here."

"We want everybody to come to the field and feel that it is a refuge," added Rebecca Schunkert, the farm's 42-year-old CEO. "It is different from the world outside. Here, you can rest. You can be the child that you are, because sometimes outside you are forced to act like an adult already."

Beyond the six adult employees, including Zaiden and Schunkert, there are two subgroups working on the farm. One group consists of 15 children, ranging from ages 12 to 18, who have left school. These children all still live at home, but most work at the farm five days a week from 7 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Everyone (except the 12-year-old, who is volunteering because he is too young to be legally paid) makes 21 shekels—just under \$6—per hour and is given breakfast and lunch, which, for many, is important. They are also given evening support if they want academic assistance, or the opportunity to meet with a therapist. The other group is slightly older, consisting of nine volunteers between 18 and 21 doing two years of national service instead of joining the army. They live at the kibbutz full time, along with the adults, and volunteer daily alongside the youth. The farm's only relationship to the kibbutz is the land-sharing partnership; beyond that, it is self-sustaining.

Kaima Hukuk grows a wide and seasonal variety of vegetables, from sweet potatoes and tomatoes to lettuce and the greenest kale I've seen in my entire life. However, the workers know almost nothing about farming when they arrive. Everyone needs to be taught in full. ("We have a lot of patience," Zaiden said diplomatically with a laugh when I asked about the ease of this process.) Accordingly, the farm isn't exactly a

model of high-speed efficiency, but that isn't the point. Take weeding:

"If there is a good connection between a young girl and a national service volunteer, let's say, I send them to weed one of the beds," said Zaiden. "I know this work would take a professional farmer 20 minutes, but for these two it could take an hour and a half. I don't mind if they sit on the soil weeding and talking—I want them to have good conversations."

Every child has a different journey (a word Schunkert and Zaiden kept using) to and from Kaima Hukuk. Nobody is assigned to work on the farm; educational offices in local cities will send potential workers, and the farm's adults do outreach in the community, talking to struggling youth about the program and whether they're interested, but ultimately the decision belongs to the child. This is also true with the length of their stay; children who are becoming valuable workers often choose to stay at the farm, moving through different divisions. Others choose to leave after a few months and go back to school.

The duration of their stay matters far less than the impact it makes on the cycles of crime, abuse, or isolation they've found themselves stuck in. "At the end of the day, the core mission of the farm is about building relationships with others, about helping them regain their trust in society," said Zaiden.

Kaima Hukuk operates on the understanding that the principles of organic farming—variety, patience, cultivation, and especially trust in natural processes—work the same way for plants and for people. They've found a lot of success with this idea.

Zaiden spoke about a boy who came to the farm at age 15, struggling with severe social anxiety. He'd spent the previous year at home playing video games, speaking to nobody, and almost never leaving the house. Gradually, he grew to enjoy the work and began coming to the farm more and more. Now, at 17, he works four days a week, happily socializes, and is much more open to the world. "When he started, he was sickly and pale," said Zaiden. "Now he looks healthy and strong—he looks alive."

**"Nobody imagined that these girls would ever finish school, and now one of them is doing national service, in Tzfat, with troubled youth."**

"For me, working here is like being on a cruise," said another child. "Just like on a cruise, at Kaima, you get to enjoy the journey." Plus, he added, "there are six adults here with their heads screwed on their shoulders, nice people with good people skills who I love."

Zaiden shared another story about two girls from big religious families in Tzfat: Both were 16 and had already been dropouts for three years, instead spending their days smoking weed and going to parties. They took to life at Kaima Hukuk, waking up early, coming every day, and working hard. Both said that this was the first place they'd ever felt truly committed to. After four months, one of them decided to go back to school in the evenings. Soon, she got even more serious about her studies and enrolled full time. The other girl saw this and went back to school herself shortly after. Both went on to pass their final exams and graduate—with good grades, too.

"Nobody imagined that these girls would ever finish school," said Zaiden. "And now one of them is doing national service, in Tzfat, with troubled youth, at an alternative café she visited herself as a young girl."

Fueled by its successes, Kaima Hukuk is

hoping to take in even more vulnerable youth. The Kaima network has grown to four; it now includes a farm exclusively for struggling girls and a farm in Tanzania. To stay afloat, Hukuk has a funding partnership with Beit Zayit, the original Kaima farm outside of Jerusalem, as well as a few Israeli organizations that support agriculture. Following the Community Supported Agriculture model, they sell 80% of their vegetables through baskets delivered weekly to residents of the area, making up half of their revenue, and sell to other farms the remaining 20% that they don't donate or eat.

They're trying to get into a program through Israel's welfare office that would give them a parcel of money for each incoming worker, though with the chaos after the last election, that hasn't happened yet. Schunkert has a lot of dreams for Kaima Hukuk's future—not just being able to employ more people, but also building a visitors center where groups like my family can come have a farm-to-table meal; hiring a new social worker (theirs just left); getting a new vehicle to drive workers and sell vegetables; and updating their irrigation system. Also, they hope to replace their tractor, which is from 1972.

But for now, they're "still struggling," said Schunkert. The organization relies on donations (which need to be earmarked specifically for Kaima Hukuk on the donation page), but "it's a difficult time in the world. People's budgets are tight." They've seen time and time again that Kaima Hukuk can be the answer these children are seeking.

"We know we can change the course of children's lives," said Zaiden. "Now, we want to have the resources so we can help even more." ■

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# Artichoke Tortino

BY PAOLA GAVIN

## INGREDIENTS

- 8 or 9** frozen artichoke bottoms, thawed
- Flour for dredging**
- olive oil for shallow frying**
- 3** eggs
- ½** cup milk or half & half
- A grating of nutmeg**
- Salt**
- Freshly ground black pepper**
- 3** tbsp freshly grated Parmesan cheese

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Cut the artichoke bottoms in half or quarters, then slice them thinly. Dredge in flour, then shallow fry in hot olive oil until they are tender and golden on both sides. Drain on paper towels.

### Step 2

In a large bowl, beat the eggs, milk, and Parmesan cheese and season with nutmeg, salt, and black pepper.

### Step 3

Arrange the artichoke bottoms in the bottom of a well-oiled, shallow baking dish and pour over the egg mixture. Bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 35 to 40 minutes or until the eggs are set and the top is golden. Serve hot.

**Yield:** 3 to 4 servings.

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